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OR,
The Spotter Sport's Unknown Foe.

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AUTHOR OF "GOLD GLOVE GID, THE MAN OF
GRIT," "OLD PLUG UGLY," "THE GIANT
SPORT," "HURRICANE HAL," ETC.

CHAPTER I. WILD BESS'S WARNING.

THE contrast between the rider and the animal he bestrode was ludicrous. The former was a dandyish-appearing individual of the sporting fraternity; the latter a scrawny and disreputable burro. They were moving leisurely along the rugged "short-cut" trail that led from Turpentine Bar to Tar Heel City. The time was mid-afternoon.

The sport seemed to be in no particular hurry, and certainly the burro was not. The sun beat down mercilessly upon them when the canyon wall did not afford them grateful shelter in the shadows.

The man's clothing was of the best broadcloth,

"GO ON, I SAY! LAUGH FOR ALL YOU ARE WORTH! NOW ALL TOGETHER!" AND SO THE SPARKLER FORCED THE RUFFIANS TO GO ALL THROUGH IT AGAIN.

The Sparkler Sharp.

and a wide-brimmed dove-colored hat was on his head. His pantaloons were thrust into the tops of the handsome long-legged boots which incased his pedal extremities. But, most noticeable were the genuine, first-water diamonds which flashed and sparkled from his fingers, his necktie, and various other points of his person. There was no sham about them.

Weapons were not to be seen about the lone sport's person, and yet something about his air and manner seemed to indicate he could produce one at an instant's notice, if it became necessary. He was a handsome fellow, with dark eyes and dark-brown hair and mustache. About five feet and ten inches in height, he was the perfect model of a man.

The sport hummed a bit of a catchy tune as he moved along, apparently having no thought that there was a living human being within miles of him.

"Oh, stranger!"

With a start, he straightened up, a revolver appearing in his hand like magic, his sharp eyes searching for the person who had uttered the call.

A merry laugh came to his ears.

"Ye'r' quick enough now, stranger, but I c'n't 'a' knocked ye over ef I'd wanted ter."

He knew the speaker was a female even before his eyes found the figure standing out on the point of rock fifteen feet above the rugged trail. And then he saw she had the drop, for a revolver in her right hand was trained straight upon him.

"I cave!" he called out, promptly. "You have the deadwood, miss, and if you are in the road-agent business, all you need do is come down and gather in my collateral."

Again she laughed, exposing two rows of snow-white teeth.

"That's business, partner," she observed. "It's plain you know w'en ye're down. Ef I wuz in the road-raiden' business, it w'u'dn't be nary blamed bit o' use fer you ter kick ag'in' the pricks. Sech foolishness'd only result in a funeral fer ye?"

"That's the way it looks, young lady," he acknowledged. "I am always willing to acknowledge the corn—when I am obliged to. But, I infer from your words you are not a foot-pad?"

"Nary. I'm dead pisen on 'em. I jest got ther drop on you ter show ye w'at a blamed keerless trick ye wuz cuttin' ridin' long so regardless like. Some critter c'u'd 'a' popped ye over 'thout hate tryin' an' gathered in them thar sparklers. Say, mister, be them generwine?"

"Those are straight goods, miss, all wool and a yard wide."

"Say, be you goin' ter Tar Heel?"

"I am headed that way."

"Better take ther shiners off; you'll lose 'em thar ef ye don't. Ther hull town'll straddle ye fer 'em."

"In which case the citizens of Tar Heel will find me a hard horse to ride. I'll prove worse than a bucking broncho."

As the girl put up her revolver, she observed:

"That's a gay ole steed you're ridin', partner!—it jest take ther prize! Whar did you capture it?"

"Over at Turpentine, I was obliged to snare it with a rope made of bank notes. They ask money for anything of the kind over there, and this was the only one I could purchase. It was a clean case of have to, or wait for to-morrow's stage. As there was no fun worth mentioning in Turpentine, I bought the burro and got out."

"You make a dandy team, you do!" And the strange girl laughed merrily again. Then she slid down from the rock almost before he could catch his breath, landing lightly on her feet.

"You're spry as a mountain goat!" he asserted, admiringly; "and graceful as a fawn," he added.

"Now, look here, mister, don't go ter givin' me any taffy!" cried the strange girl, soberly. "If thar's anything thet leaves a bad taste in my mouth, it's taffy!"

"My tongue only gave utterance to the thought of my brain," was the sport's assertion.

"Then you'd best set a watch on yer tongue."

Still, the sport simply told the truth. And, besides being graceful as a fawn, the girl was almost handsome, being a genuine maid of the mountains, who cared little for the effect of the weather on her complexion. There was an irresistible charm about her, and when she laughed, showing those pearly teeth, she was simply bewitching. She was free and easy, having not the least affectation of manner, appearing to be exactly what she was.

This strange girl was dressed in stout woolen garments which fitted her supple form very well. The dress-skirt was short, enabling her to pick her way more easily over the rough country. On her head she wore a wide-brimmed hat, and a mass of black hair was gracefully coiled in a "png" low down at her neck. Her eyes were dark, large and brilliant. A belt around her waist supported a brace of handsome revolvers.

The sport surveyed her from head to feet, his

admiration being apparent, although he tried to conceal any offensive display of it.

"Now ye bev taken it all in, stranger, w'at'll we give fer ther lump?" demanded the girl, a hot flush in her cheeks and just a trace of indignation in her voice.

"All I am worth?" was the prompt reply.

"You bid too mighty low. I bain't givin' myself away—not this day!"

"I trust my manuer has not offended you, miss?" he hastened to say. "I assure you, I meant nothing offensive, and I beg your pardon."

Her face cleared in a moment, and smiled again.

"Oh, it's all right!" she declared. "I s'pose I'm too fired quick, but I can't help it sometimes.—Who be you?"

"I am Basil Rodman."

"Ther Sparkler Sharp?"

"Yes."

"Ur ther Spotter Sport?"

"I am sometimes given both titles."

"I knowed it soon as I spotted ther glint o' them stuns. Say! them are dandies, pard!"

Basil Rodman smiled at her enthusiasm.

"I reckon them cost a right good bit!" she continued, as she tipped her head to one side and surveyed the stones. "They hit a feller right in ther eye. Great Jimmy Christmas! w'b'dn't I like ter hev some like them!"

Scarcely had the words left her lips before the Sparkler Sharp had removed the handsome diamond scarf-pin from his tie and was holding it out to her.

"With my compliments," he said.

She looked at him in amazement.

"Take it," urged the man.

"Wat, me?"

"Yes, you."

"Me take that?"

"That is what I mean."

"Say, mister!"

"What?"

"You don't mean it?"

"But I do."

"Wal, w'at d'yer take me fer! I don't know you! Do you think I'm ther kind thet takes presents frum strangers? Wal, ef ye do, you've made a big mistake!"

Her eyes were flashing fire and her cheeks crimson. She drew back, placing her hands behind her. Although she was plainly burning with indignation at what she considered an insult, the man came near uttering an exclamation of admiration. At that moment she was the most beautiful creature it had ever been his fortune to behold.

Unconsciously Basil Rodman's outstretched hand fell and he sat staring at the girl. She returned his gaze, looking him fairly in the face. For some moments there was silence between them.

The sport was the first to recover.

"Have I done it again?" he cried, despairingly. "If I open my mouth to-day, I seem bound to put my foot in it! I had no idea of offending you again, but I see I have done so. How shall I back water?"

"You didn't mean it then, after all?"

"If you say so, be sure I didn't."

"Then it's all right, though you did start me. Putt up ther shiner, an' we'll talk biz."

Basil restored the pin to his scarf.

"Business, is it?" he observed. "Then you are here for business reasons."

"Wal, I didn't tramp hyer frum Tar Heel fer nuthin', partner. Thet bain't Wild Bess's style."

"And you are Wild Bess?"

"I reckon."

"You are from Tar Heel?"

"Shore's ye live."

"What can your business with me be?"

"I kem hyer ter warn ye."

"To warn me?"

"Yep."

"Of what?"

"A funeral. Thar's one been planned fer ye, stranger, an' you'll be dead in luck ef ye miss it."

"Ho-ho! Is that it? And by that, I reckon they are looking for me at Tar Heel?"

"They've heerd as how ye wuz comin'."

"They think of wiping me out."

"Sart'in."

A hard look passed over the Sparkler Sharp's handsome face.

"How do you know this?"

"I've got some mighty good ears, pard, an' I'm in ther habit o' harkin' round a right good bit. In that way I hears a heap o' things, I do."

"And you heard—just what?"

"I heerd two o' ther wu'st skunks in Tar Heel plannin' ter do ye up fer a wooden overcoat."

"Who are they?"

"Two critters known as Horror Hank an' Gentle Jim. Hank's er big six-footer an' calls bisself ther best man in Tar Heel. Jim's not more'n five fut high, but he's er reg'ler leetle devil. He's ther wu'st one o' ther two, fer he don't make no bones o' shootin' at a man's back."

"And these two good citizens of Tar Heel have it in for me? Well, they may wake up the

wrong man, for, thanks to your warning, I shall watch out for them."

"It'll be well thet ye do. They 'lowed ye'd be erlong some time ter-day, an' they wuz goin' ter lay fer ye on ther trail. Thet's why I tuck ther trouble ter come 'way out yere."

"Miss Bess, you may be sure I appreciate your kindness. I shall not forget this, and some time I may be able to square the account."

"Now, don't go ter talkin' like that, fer thar hain't no 'count a tall. I done ther same fer you as I'd done fer any other human critter. It'd seemed as ef I'd hed some han' in your murder ef I'd kep' still an' let 'em salted ye. I looked fer ther critters as I kem erlong, but I didn't see hide ner ha'r o' 'em, so I reckon they thought you'd come ther longest way, roun' by ther reg'ler stage-trail. They're prob'ly watchin' fer ye somewhar thar."

"In which case they will have their trouble for nothing."

"All ther same, you want ter look sharp fer 'em w'en ye gits inter Tar Heel. Ef they misses ye on ther road, thet won't keep 'em frum tryin' ter down ye in town."

"I will look out for them. I wonder what they have against me."

"Mebbe it's ther sparklers they're arter. but I reckon thar mought be somebody behind 'em as wuz settin' 'em on."

Basil nodded.

"I think you are right about that," he said.

"Wal, I've posted ye, so watch out. I'm goin' ter slide now."

"Aren't you going back to Tar Heel?"

"Not just now, stranger. So-long." And, before he could say anything more, she darted away, scaled the almost perpendicular face of the rock, reached the point above, waved her hand to him and disappeared.

CHAPTER II.

A VERY LAUGHABLE AFFAIR.

BASIL RODMAN watched the girl till she had disappeared from view, then he drew a deep breath, muttering:

"She has returned above, from whence she came down—a mountain angel surely!"

The burro seemed asleep, and for the first time he noticed he had not dismounted.

"I entirely forgot myself," he protested, by way of apology, although there was no one to hear his words. "She took me so by surprise that I did not remember my manners. I'll bet a hundred I did not touch my hat at all!"

Chagrin and self-reproach were pictured on his countenance. He went on:

"And she disappeared so quickly I had no chance to express my thanks properly. Well, I will do so the next time I meet her."

"She is pretty—pretty as a wild flower! Yes, and if I am not greatly deceived, as pure! How she resented my offer of this scarf-pin! Why, a Fifth avenue belle could not have shown more indignation at an offensive familiarity! I scarcely thought what I was doing when I offered it to her, but I was amazed by the manner in which she met my offer. The man who attempts to be familiar with her will get into trouble."

He dismounted from the burro and stretched his limbs. Then he mounted again and started the animal onward. As he rode along, he mused aloud:

"So, enemies are waiting my arrival in Tar Heel. It has been so wherever I have traveled for some time. A dozen attempts have been made upon my life, but good fortune has enabled me to frustrate every one. I am sure I have a secret foe who is hunting me down. Who can it be?"

For a few seconds he rode onward in silence, thinking deeply, then he resumed:

"It cannot be any one who knows of the past—the bitter past! No, no! It is probably some person whose relative or friend I brought to justice. By and by he will show his hand, whoever he is, then it will be my turn."

Basil Rodman had little thought of immediate danger as he rode along, for Wild Bess had failed to detect his enemies on the trail, and concluded they had taken the other route. So, with his head bowed, the Spotter Sport remained in a reverie.

The trail grew rougher as it crept slowly upward, but the little burro seemed good for it. Although anything but speedy, the animal was almost as sure-footed as a mountain goat.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, the burro halted and threw up its head. The act saved Basil Rodman's life!

Out on the afternoon air rung the report of two revolvers, the shots almost sounding as one, and down on the ground went man and beast. The sport was not touched, both bullets having lodged in the burro's brain, but he lay quite still beside the fallen animal, apparently death-stricken.

Up from behind some rocks, above which a puff of smoke was fading in the air, rose two human heads. The faces were dissimilar, yet the stamp of the desperado was on both. One man's head was crowned by a shock of bristling red hair, and his features were repulsive and brutal. He wore a long mustache and imperial, which added to his fierce aspect.

The other man was the smaller of the two, being almost a dwarf, and his face was entirely free of beard. The lines about his mouth made him look like a sad and peaceful sort of person, but there was an evil look in his eyes that gave those lines the lie.

Both men held revolvers clutched in their hands, and it was plain they fired the shots which brought burro and rider tumbling to the ground. They stared hard at the fallen man, then both uttered exclamations of satisfaction.

"Fetched him, Hank!" cried the smaller, speaking in a singular squeaky voice—"fetched him first pop!"

The red-headed giant laughed.

"Yes, we fetched him. An' this is ther fierce an' turrible Sparkler Sharp—ther critter w'at owns a private burryin'-groun'! Oh, woosh! That wus all wind!"

Then both men clambered over the rocks and approached the fallen sport. They still grasped their weapons, but neither thought they would have reason to use them again. Apparently, the foully-ambushed man had been dead before he struck the ground.

But appearances are often deceptive. The would-be assassins discovered they were in this case.

Suddenly, like a flash, the supposed dead man sat up, and a pair of revolvers gleamed in his hands.

"Hello, pard!" he called, cheerfully. "Mighty fine day—Drop it, you dog! I'll send your black soul to Satan if you try the trick!"

The dwarf was the one addressed, for the smaller man had attempted to take a snap shot at the sport. However, those ringing words checked him with remarkable suddenness.

"Ther du-durned whelp wuz playin' it on us!" spluttered the red-head. "He wuzn't killed a tall!"

Something like a smile stole over Basil Rodman's face.

"You are right," he answered. "I did play it on you, although you have killed my noble steed, Horror Hank."

"Great ginger! He knows me!" gasped the astonished ruffian.

"He do, fer sure," whined Gentle Jim.

"And I know you, as well," asserted the Sparkler Sharp, his eyes seeming to have caught a glint of fire from the diamonds he wore. "You are gentle Jim, but the name is a misnomer, for you are a treacherous and bloodthirsty rascal of the lowest type."

"He knows us both!" whimpered the smaller rascal. And then, as if a scheme had suddenly flashed through his head, he cried: "Why, this hain't ther critter we thought it wuz, Hank—this hain't Wobber Dutch of Turpentine!"

Horror Hank looked bewildered.

"I never—I dunno—"

Gentle Jim saw his pard was going to make a mess of it, and he broke in, quickly:

"You know we wuz layin' fer Wobber Dutch, 'cause he snuffed out Bile Fogg las' week. We took this yere gent fer him—you know?"

It was plain the red-headed giant did not know, but he mumbled:

"Oh, yes, 'course I do!"

The Sparkler Sharp laughed outright.

"Quite a little joke!" he declared.

"He! he! he!" snickered Gentle Jim. "A powerful joke, pard!"

Feeling it his duty to laugh, although he felt anything but amused, Horror Hank joined in.

"Haw! haw! haw! Durndest joke I ever saw!"

"Funny, isn't it?" innocently inquired Basil.

"Mighty funny," agreed both of the ruffians.

"Don't hold in your merriment," advised the sport. "Now is a good time to laugh. Let it right out, gentlemen."

Then the two rascals pretended to roar with laughter. As soon as they let up a bit, Basil urged them on again.

"Don't mind my feelings, gents; laugh as hard as you please. It really does me good to hear you laugh."

They felt it their duty to laugh, and so they tried it again. Horror Hank roared out his hoarse "haw-haws" and Gentle Jim joined in with his squeaking "he-hes." It was really a ludicrous spectacle.

When the merriment of the two toughs abated somewhat, the sport urged them to continue laughing.

"Don't feel obliged to pause on my account," he said, smoothly. "I love to see you laugh; really it does my soul good to witness your innocent mirth. It is refreshing—it really is."

So they laughed some more, but it was not as heartily as before. They were becoming tired of laughing, but the never quivering weapons in the hands of the cool sport influenced them to continue their mirth. Someway, they were afraid one of those weapons would go off if they stopped laughing, so they stuck to it in a commendable manner. Whenever they slacked up, Basil would urge them to go on, and then they would attempt it once more.

After a time their laughter became groans more than anything else, but still the heartless sport kept urging them on.

"Isn't it jolly!" he cried, his face beaming with genuine pleasure. "This is a regular jubilee.

Go on! hoe in, there! Laugh, I tell you—laugh!"

"See here," protested Hank, "I have—haw! haw! I've laughed all I—haw! haw!—want to. There hain't no more—haw! haw!—fun in this, and I'm—haw! haw!—tired of it."

"So am I—he! he!" confessed Gentle Jim. "It alwus makes me feel—he! he! he!—sick after I laugh too hard. I'm beginnin' ter—he!—feel that way so quick."

"And you will feel more so if you do not laugh for all you are worth," menacingly retorted Basil. "Your laughter is like sweet music to my ears. You had your fun with me first, regardless of my feelings, but now I protest you must have some care for me. Go on, I say! Laugh for all you are worth! Now—all together!"

And so the Sparkler forced the ruffians to go all through it again, although it seemed as if it would kill them to laugh any more. In that manner he compelled them to keep up the mockery of a laugh for nearly half an hour. When he finally permitted them to stop, they were almost as limp as dish-cloths, and their strength was entirely gone. He had already compelled them to drop their revolvers, and he advanced boldly upon them.

"This has been a really amusing affair, hasn't it, gentlemen?" he smiled, as he still kept them beneath the muzzles of his revolvers. "It is not every day you can have so much fun at my expense, but there is an old saw that says 'turn about is fair play.'"

"W'at are ye goin' ter do?" feebly asked Horror Hank.

"I am going to take my turn at laughing," answered Basil. "He who laughs last laughs best."

CHAPTER III.

THE DOUBLE MAZEPPO.

THE two ruffians looked at each other in dismay.

"We're in fer it, pard!" gasped Gentle Jim. "Ther o'ner critter's goin' ter wipe us out!"

"An' all on account of er leetle mistake! This yere's foul play!"

"Do you really think so, gentlemen?" blandly inquired the Spotter Sport. "You fellows lay in ambush for me behind those rocks and made a foul attempt to kill me without the least warning, and now you talk of foul play! Truly, you amuse me."

"But ye see, we took ye fer Wobber Dutch."

"No; I do not see. Do I look like Wobber Dutch?"

"Heap sight w'en ye're on ther burrer."

"Honest Injun!"

"Straight goods, pard."

"Now, you know better than that, Hank! Wobber Dutch is a big, fat, drunken bummer. His clothes are dirty, and his face is little better. Do you mean to compare me with that creature?"

The red-headed bully looked distressed.

"I don't mean ter compare ye with him, pard," he protested, sweat starting out on his face. "You don't look much like him now, though we made ther mistake w'en ye wuz straddle of ther burrer. You see, he allus rides a burrer."

"Now, I do not see anything of the kind. I happen to know this Wobber Dutch of Turpentine, and he looks about as much like me as I look like a Digger Injun. He never rides a burro, for he does not own such an animal, and can not raise money enough to hire one."

"It is plain to me that you two rascals were hired to come out here and kill me."

Both of the toughs uttered groans and made gestures of protest, but the sport went on, deliberately:

"You only failed by aiming a little low, probably to make sure of not failing. When the burro threw up its head, it was just in time to catch both bullets in its brain, and thus I was saved from death at your hands."

"Thank Heavings fer that!" broke in Gentle Jim.

"Amen!" gurgled Horror Hank. "We're glad yer blood hain't on our han's!"

"You can lie too fast for me to keep track of you. But, just now I demand the straight truth. Who hired you to do this dirty work?"

Once more both men protested they did it solely on their own account. They saw something in Basil Rodman's eyes that made them shiver, still they would not acknowledge there had been such a compact as the sport believed.

"All right," came grimly from the Sparkler Sharp's lips. "Stick to your lie and take the consequence. I have had some experience dealing with your class, and, if you had confessed who was at the bottom of this work, I would have struck straight at the fountain head. As it is, I am forced to visit punishment on you."

"Oh, Lord!"

"We're goners!"

"Kin you pray, Jim?"

"Nary pray, pard!"

Then both groaned again.

"You did not foot it here from Tar Heel. Where are your horses?"

"Hain't got none," asserted Horror Hank.

"Ha! Will you lie?"

"They're mewls," squeaked Gentle Jim.

Basil was forced to smile,

"Mules will do as well as anything," he said.

"Now, both you fellows lay down on your faces and place your hands behind your backs."

"W'at fer?"

"Because I say so."

The two rascals looked at each other.

"We're done fer!" whined Gentle Jim.

"Let's jump him!" and Hank seemed on the point of springing upon the sport, but Basil's ready revolvers prevented the act.

"Down!"

Both hesitated.

"Get down!"

"We've got ter do it!" whimpered Jim.

"I won't!" growled Hank.

"Get down, or I will drill you both!"

There was no further hesitation. Down on their knees they went, and then they stretched themselves on their faces, placing their hands behind their backs, as they had been commanded.

For all of the fellow's ready submission, Basil considered Gentle Jim the most dangerous, for he saw treachery in the little rascal's eyes, so he set about attending the gentle man first.

"Keep perfectly quiet, Hank," he advised.

"It will prove very unhealthy for you to wiggle."

In a brief space of time the sport had secured Gentle Jim's hands behind his back. Then he turned his attention to the big ruffian, and in a few seconds, both men were beyond doing harm for a time.

"Now, boys," came smoothly from the triumphant sharp's lips, "I have you where the wool is short. You can't work any funny business if you want to, so get up."

With some difficulty, they arose to their feet.

"Now, you will lead me direct to the place where you left those mules."

They did not protest; they knew it was useless. So they marched along with the sport following, gayly whistling "Tramp, tramp, tramp the boys are marching."

For half an hour they led him onward, and then they came to the spot where the mules had been concealed.

"Rather tough-looking beasts," observed the sharp, as he surveyed them; "but I reckon the best one is as good as the burro you shot under me. I will have to appropriate the creature to fill my animal's place."

Horror Hank began to protest, but Basil cut him short.

"The closer you keep that mouth shut the better it will be for you," he said. "You should have discovered by this time I mean business. It will do neither of you good to whine or growl. You may thank your lucky stars I did not shoot you like dogs, as you deserved, when I first had the drop on you. I could have done so and been justified in the act. I imagine Tar Heel would have been glad had I rid her of you."

So they were silenced.

Getting everything ready, Basil ordered Hank to mount one of the mules. When the rough protested he could not do so with his hands confined behind his back, the sport caught hold of him and, with a strength that amazed both men, fairly flung him astride the mule. Then he secured the ruffian's feet beneath the animal's belly.

"Now," and he turned to Gentle Jim, "it is your turn."

A moment later the little fellow was sitting astride the mule, being close behind the back of his red-headed comrade. His feet were also secured. Then Basil stepped back and surveyed his work.

"That fixes you all right, my dandies," he laughed. "Isn't it fun, boys! I have not had so much sport in a month of Sabbath days!"

But the unlucky rascals did not look as if they were enjoying it at all.

"You had your turn at laughing; it is mine now," smoothly cooed the sport. "You struck a full-grown snag when you butted up against Basil Rodman. This time you are going to get off easily, for which you should thank your star of fortune. Next time—Well, the Sparkler Sharp is not a coon to be crowded—you hear me?"

Hank and Jim had not a word to say.

The sport mounted the other mule, then he led along the rugged trail the one, on which were bound the men who had tried to murder him.

In this manner they moved forward for nearly an hour. At the end of that time, they reached the crest of a slope overlooking Tar Heel City. Before them the trail ran down the steep descent till it joined the regular stage-road that led into the mining-camp.

Basil halted and surveyed the trail with satisfaction.

"W'at be ye goin' ter do?" inquired Horror Hank. "Are ye goin' ter take us down ther ter be tried afore Jedge Lynch?"

"Oh, no!" laughed the sport. "I am going to turn you loose now."

"Not boun' on this yere critter ther way we are?"

"You have struck it, partner," acknowledged Basil, as he reached out and plucked a thorn from a briar bush. "And this will serve as a spur to keep up steam. Your gallant steed

The Sparkler Sharp.

might stop and fall asleep by the wayside if he did not have something to prevent him from doing so and remind him of his duty."

Both men began to beg.

"The critter'll never git down this yere rough trail all right!" asserted Hank, in fear. "He'll be shore ter fall an' break his neck!"

"An oun tool!" whined Gentle Jim. "This hain't no fair shake, pard!"

"You may as well take it coolly," asserted Basil. "You will make a grand double Mazepa. The good citizens of Tar Heel will probably be astonished to see you come tearing into town in this manner. I always create some excitement wherever I go; it is a way I have. I love excitement—I feast on it! It is like fodder to me. Say, if any one asks you anything about it, tell them I am coming right along and I will explain."

Then he inserted the thorn in such a manner that it would continue to prick the mule no matter how fast the animal traveled. The creature gave a hoarse squeal, a wild kick, and then it shot down the trail, its tail in the air.

"Go it, old chain-lightning!" cried Basil, waving his hat around his head. "Slide, you space-devouring cyclone, slide! Great heavens! see that creature skin!—see it go over those stones! Why a common bowler is nothing to it! I reckon it would go clean over a house, if the house happened to be in the way! Great Scott! the hair on the heads of those rascals must be turning gray!"

Indeed, the mule paused for no obstruction. With speed that must have astonished itself, it fairly shot down the rough trail, now and then giving vent to hoarse brays of rage, pain and terror. Soon a small patch of timber concealed it from view for a short time, then it dashed out into sight further down, struck the main stage trail and plunged along toward Tar Heel. The sport watched the animal and its riders till all disappeared within the little mining-town.

"Now to follow and learn the termination of their Mazeppa act," he said, as he started down the trail.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN WITH A SCHEME.

As Basil was riding slowly and carefully down the rough descent, a man suddenly arose from where he had been seated on a stone beside the trail.

"I wonder if this can be another Lightning Express train?" he murmured, adjusting spectacles to the bridge of his nose and surveying the sport.

"Same kind of a bulljine," he continued, as if speaking to himself; "but it doesn't seem to have on such a head of steam as the other. I had barely time to escape from the track in the first instance, but the danger in this case seems immaterial—that is, not apparently obvious, or words to that effect."

He was a decidedly slender individual, and he was certainly six feet in height. His clothes fitted him so closely his slenderness was more apparent. They were of the "loud" checked variety, and, oddly enough, the coat was a "Prince Albert." They were a trifle shabby, as if they had seen hard times. A white high hat was canted over the man's left eye, and there was a rakish air about him, as if he considered himself one of the boys. His face had not been touched by a razor for several days. His eyes were searching in their expression.

"Howdy, pard," called Basil. "Have you seen anything of a runaway mule?"

"With two human individuals as an attachment?" inquired the man.

"Yes."

"The creature slid by a few seconds ago," answered he of the white hat. "It had a decided move on. I am something of a rustler myself, but I barely had time to get out of the path when *whish!* it scooted past like a rocket. It set me to calculating. If a mule can travel a mile down-grade in two minutes, how long will it take a meteoric body to travel from Venus to the Earth?"

Basil saw he had struck a character, and, being in no particular hurry to reach Tar Heel, he dismounted to have a few words with the strange individual.

"I am afraid I shall have to give your problem up," he confessed. "I never was much good at figures."

"Well, I always had a pretty clear head, but there seems to be some hitch about this problem. Just what it is I am not qualified at this instance to asseverate. But, sir, I do not recollect of having seen you around Tar Heel."

"It would be strange if you did; I have never been there."

"Stranger, eh?"

"Yes."

"I was a stranger there four days ago. My name is Jerry Jiggers, and I am from New York City. I have heard a great deal about the unbounded opportunities in the West for men of genius, and so I came out to this country."

"Well, Mr. Jiggers, what do you think of the West?"

"It is immense, sir, in fact it is too immense. It needs populating, sir. Why, it is astonishing how thinly settled the country is. But I have

a scheme, sir—a great scheme! I mean to bring my influence to bear on the country and build it up. They shall feel the weight of Jerry Jiggers's power, sir—but, might I inquire your name, sir?"

"Certainly. I am Basil Rodman."

"Rodman? Rodman? I do not recall the name, and still your face seems familiar. Well, it is not strange, for I am roaming about so much, and see so many people, I cannot remember them all. Were you ever in New York?"

The sharp started and gazed keenly at Jiggers, but the peculiar individual met his look in an innocent, inquiring manner.

"Yes, I have been in New York," he slowly replied, after a time.

"Great town!" asserted Mr. Jiggers, rubbing his hands briskly together. "They make rustlers there. That's where I came from. I'm a rustler. It is necessary to rustle in this segashitated world, if a fellow is going to secure daily nourishment. But there was not room enough for my genius in New York; that's why I came West."

"And you find room enough here?"

"Almost too much, sir. But, you must have the rocks, my friend. I have the eye of an expert, and I pronounce those diamonds first-class."

Basil laughed.

"Then you do not consider them paste?"

"Nary paste! Having the scudi, you may be the very man I am looking for. As I said before, I have a scheme—a great scheme, sir. If you will give me your ultimate and undivided attention, I will unfold it for your satisfaction."

"Drive ahead. I reckon I can stand it."

"All right. My scheme is simple. The land around Tar Heel can be purchased at a very low figure, and the town is located in the grandest part of Colorado. I propose to purchase a vast tract of land and give a free lot to every young couple married in Brooklyn who will move here immediately. If the lot is not inducement enough, it will be well to pay their transportation here. In this manner we will soon have this section thickly populated, for you know Brooklyn is the champion town for babies, and every young couple who came here would aid us in swelling the work for the next census-taker."

Basil was amused, but he promptly said:

"I fail to see how that can redound to the profit of the parties who expend money in getting them here."

"Ah-a!" exclaimed Mr. Jiggers, again rubbing his hands together. "That is the point of my scheme. My dear sir, you can little understand what a vast amount of soda-water and ice-cream is consumed in Brooklyn. Now, my scheme is this: The crest of yonder mountain is crowned with snow the whole year round. Up there I will place a soda fountain and an ice-cream manufactory. The soda water I will bring into town by an underground tube; the ice-cream shall be brought down by a sluice. As soon as the young people from Brooklyn get here, they will keep us pouring down soda water and sluicing ice-cream all the time. And the snow, sir, the snow on yonder mountain will save us the expense of ice! In one season we can become independently wealthy! Ah-ha! What do you think of it now, sir? Is it not a great—a wonderful scheme?"

"It certainly is—a most astonishing scheme."

Mr. Jiggers tapped his forehead with the index finger of his right hand.

"It originated here, sir," he said, with dignity. "My head is continually teeming with such schemes, but I always lack the capital to carry them to a successful termination. In fact, I am in severely straitened circumstances just at present. I was studying up a scheme to secure a little change when mule number one and its riders came shooting along and disturbed my meditations. I have freely and unreservedly unfolded a wonderful plan for obtaining wealth, sir, and I have not asked you a penny for hearing it; but now if you could afford to let me have a dollar till we get the scheme in full operation, it would be a favor highly appreciated by yours truly, Jerry Jiggers, Esq."

"Mr. Jiggers," said Basil, soberly, "you deserve the dollar. There is not another man on the face of this broad earth who could have studied out such a wonderful and daring plan for obtaining wealth."

The Man With a Scheme drew himself up with dignity.

"I did not study it out, sir—it came to me like a flash of light, as all my best inspirations come. I thank you, sir. I assure you this dollar shall be returned with interest as soon as I get my soda-water and ice-cream plant working on a paying basis."

"Oh, I will risk your defrauding me," laughed Basil.

"I will not defraud you, sir," stiffly returned Mr. Jiggers. "I had rather owe a man a dollar as long as I live than to cheat him out of fifty cents. The Jiggers family is noted for its honorable dealings."

"I have the utmost confidence in you; your face is one to inspire immediate and implicit trust."

"You are not the first man to tell me so, sir.

But, permit me to inquire if you think favorably of my scheme? You see, I have the brains; and from your appearance, I infer you have the scads. A combination of money and brains is always successful. Shall we go into this affair together?"

"I will think it over, Mr. Jiggers."

"Is it necessary?"

"I believe so. You see, I would be investing a large sum of money. If the scheme failed, I would be ruined. You are simply investing your brains, and if the scheme was a failure you would have as many brains left as you have at the present time."

"Hem! hem!" coughed Jiggers. "I had not thought of that. But, if you do not wish to put in so much capital, I have another scheme—one that will not require more than a hundred thousand dollars or so. It is to produce natural gas—"

Basil checked him.

"Such an expense as that is not necessary, Mr. Jiggers. You can supply natural gas enough to run a furnace, free of charge. If I require gas, I would hire you to come sit around my ranch and talk."

At first the Man With a Scheme seemed inclined to be offended, but the sport's jolly laugh banished his anger.

"Ha! ha! ha! You are quite a joker, sir," he declared, joining in the merriment. "If there is any one who appreciates a good joke it is Jerry Jiggers."

Basil now mounted the mule once more, and the two started down the trail together, chatting freely.

In a short time they reached the main trail. By this time it was sunset.

A clatter of hoofs behind them caused them to look round, and they saw a woman in black, mounted on a handsome horse. She swept past, scarcely giving them a look.

But the Spotter Sport stared at the woman as if he had seen an apparition. Jerry Jiggers's keen eyes noticed the sharp's agitation, and he immediately asked:

"Have you ever seen that woman before, sir? You look as if you recognized her."

Basil slowly shook his head.

"I thought I did," he acknowledged; "but I must have been mistaken. This cannot be the one!"

CHAPTER V.

IN A TIGHT CORNER.

BASIL RODMAN rode calmly into Tar Heel City, little expecting the reception he would meet. He approached the principal hotel and was just dismounting from the mule, when a dozen men suddenly confronted him.

"Thar he is!" roared the voice of Horror Hank—"thar's ther o'ney muel-stealin' skunk!"

"Yes," squeaked the voice of Gentle Jim, "thet's ther critter as tied us onter ther muel an' tried ter git our necks bruck by sendin' ther critter racin' down ther Short Cut Trail."

"It wuz er clean an' deliberate tempt at murder!" asserted the red-headed ruffian.

"He's er p'izen road-agent!" declared the dwarf desperado. "He held us up on ther highway an' robbed us!"

"Thet's my muel he's just got off frum," excitedly affirmed Hank. "W'at does Tar Heel do with hoss-thieves?"

And then the crowd began to yell:

"Lynch him!"

"Shoot him!"

"String him up!"

"Give him a rope necktie!"

"To the nearest tree!"

Jerry Jiggers had accompanied Basil to the hotel, but he now began to tremble and look alarmed:

"I tut-tut-tut-trust you will excuse me, sir," he said, speaking to the Sparkler Sharp. "I have some pressing business which requires my immediate attention. I will see you later—if I find out where they hang you," he added *sotto voce*.

Then the Man With a Scheme slipped away and quickly disappeared.

The sport did not seem alarmed—simply surprised.

"What is the trouble, gentlemen?" he calmly inquired.

"Heur thet!" squealed Gentle Jim. "Oh, ther gall of him! He wants ter know w'at ther trouble is! Wal, I sw'ar!"

"Don't swear, James," advised Basil. "It is wicked and not at all in accord with your gentle and peace-loving instinct."

But this simply aroused the vengeful tough to still greater anger. The sport's coolness was certainly aggravating in the extreme.

"Go fer him!" piped the little rascal, dancing up and down. "Come on! foller me!"

"Yes, come on!" bellowed Hank. "Foller us!"

"Stop!"

Like a flash of light, the Sharp's ready revolvers appeared in his hands and were turned on the desperate gang. The intended rush was checked.

"I am a bad man to crowd," fell deliberately from the Spotter Sport's mustache-shaded lips,

and there did not seem anything boastful about his assertion. "I do not boast of a private cemetery or anything of that kind, but I will start one right here in Tar Heel if you attempt to run over me. Go slow and easy is my advice, and you will find it worth following."

There was a dangerous light in his eyes. They sparkled like the diamonds he wore, and the look on his face meant injury to the man who pressed forward.

Some of the crowd had drawn their weapons. Revolvers and knives were in many a hand, but the fellows seemed to hesitate about shooting.

"Why don't you drop ther whelp?" snarled Horror Hank. "Jest let me—"

He had a knife gripped in his right hand, so he attempted to draw a revolver with his left. Like the ring of a bugle sounded Basil Rodman's voice, causing the red-head to pause with the pistol half-drawn.

"Hold! You will chew lead if you try it on!"

The sport had taken a position behind the mule, the animal serving as a breastwork. He did not seem in the least daunted by the number of men who opposed him, although it must have been plain to him that he was in a decidedly tight corner.

"You will be the first man I shall spot, if worse comes to worse, Horror Hank," asserted the Sparkler Sharp, speaking with the deliberation of a man who has lots of time to spare. "Gentle Jim will follow, and then I shall turn my guns on the rest of the crowd. I reckon I can come mighty near wiping out this gang before they can get at me."

Something about the sharp's deliberate manner and utter confidence in his own abilities inspired fear among his foes. They had heard of this diamond-ornamented card-sharp before, and they had heard he was a perfect cyclone in a fight. He looked like the most mild-mannered and peaceable man imaginable, but more than one of the ruffians crew had learned from past experience that appearances are not to be depended on at all times.

Hank and Jim were filled with rage and disgust by meeting such a rebuff, but they had no intention of abandoning their attempt on the life of the man whom they had failed to kill on the Short Cut Trail. In some way they meant to get the best of the sport.

"You're a blamed fool!" growled Hank.

"If I bad half an even show I would make you eat them words, you big bully!" retorted Basil.

"I hain't fightin' with hoss-thieves an' road-agents," Hank fired back.

"You have not the courage to fight with any one, unless you are dead sure of being the best man. Your face brands you as a wretch and a coward."

"Oh, woo!" howled the enraged ruffian. "Thet's too much! Now you've got ter swing!"

"I'll bet you odds you will be the one to swing."

Here one of the other men stepped forward.

"Looker hyer," he called, glaring at Basil, from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"All right."

With those words the sport turned one of his revolvers on the fellow, who, uttering an exclamation of dismay, dodged behind a comrade.

"Say," he cried, "you mustn't do that! My nerves are powerful weak, an' our family physician says I have a tetch of heart disease. You might shock me so I'd never recover."

"That is so," Basil smilingly confessed. "I might shock you as bad as that, if I took a notion. But, if you take good care to keep out of my way, I shall not take a notion."

"You're makin' a fool of yerself," the man asserted. "These yere fellers say you stole a muel frum them, an' ther evydence is ag'in' ye, fer the muel is in your possession. Now, you might jest as well cave in fu'st as last, fer this yere town alwus hangs your kind."

"Is that so? Well to begin with, I deny robbing these individuals of a mule. They are assassins of the lowest type, and they lay in ambush for me back along the trail. It happened the burro I was riding threw up its head just as they fired, and the beast caught both bullets in its brain. It went to the ground in a heap and I went down with it. I lay still, as if I had been salted, till these fellows exposed themselves, then I got the drop. Next, I tied them both upon the back of one of their mules and sent them down the trail. I took the other mule in place of the burro they shot, which any man must acknowledge was no more than fair. In fact, it let the fellows off easy, for, had I treated them as they deserved, I would have shot them both when I had the drop."

Both Hank and Jim laughed derisively.

"It's er derned lie!" squealed Jim.

"Hain't a bit a truth in it," asserted Hank. "This critter laid fer us abind ther rocks and got ther drop as we kem erlong. Arter he went through our pockets he made us straddle one of ther muels, wile be tuck t'other. An' now he has ther gall ter ride in hyer an' tell sech er yarn."

"This yere will bev ter be investigated," as-

serted one of the crowd. "Jest you guv in, stranger, an' we'll bev a trial."

"Not any trial in mine," returned Basil, who fully understood the kind of a "trial" he would get.

"Thet's it! thet's it!" squealed Gentle Jim. "He don't durst stan' his trial like er man! He knows his yarn's er lie."

"It is true!"

The words were uttered by a person who had approached quite unnoticed, and that person was Wild Bess.

"Ther stranger sharp hes told ther truth, ther hull truth, an' nothin' but ther truth," the girl declared, as she took her place at Basil Rodman's side. "I happen ter know w'at I'm torkin' in' bout. I warned ther stranger 'fore he struck them two disgraces ter Tar Heel, fer I knew they wuz intendin' ter lay fer him. He run inter ther trap, an' I has seen ther dead burro he wuz ridin' in ther fu'st place. It lays back yon up thar on ther trail whar anybody kin see it. You galoots meant to down the sport 'thout guyin' him no show a tall, but ye didn't do it, an' ye hain't goin' ter do it, nuther. I'll stan' by him tell ther sun freezes over, an I reckon you know me!"

Two bright revolvers appeared in her hands and were turned on the crowd.

"It's Wild Bess!" muttered one of the throng, in disgust. "Ther fun's spoilt! Hank an' Jim'll hev ter git somebody ter fill my place. I hain't fightin' feemales!"

"Me, too!"

"Ner I."

"Count me out!"

"I hain't in it!"

One by one the two ruffians saw their supporters desert them, till, at length, they were left entirely alone.

"Now," said Wild Bess, significantly, "I advise you coyotes ter git a wiggle on. If you don't mosey mighty sudden, your funeral'll be ter-morrer, as ther hymn-chune has it. Savvy? Scat! skip! slide!"

With growls and threats, the twice defeated ruffians turned and slunk away.

"Miss Bess, you're a brick!" exclaimed Basil, admiringly.

"An' you're another," she retorted. "You stood that gang off in fine shape. I'm dead stuck on your style! Shake, pard!"

They shook.

CHAPTER VI.

WITHIN THE MOUNTAIN PALACE.

It was night, and a great throng had gathered in the "Mountain Palace," the principal saloon of Tar Heel. The place belied its name, for it was anything but a palace, still it was a fair representative of such resorts to be found in the Western mining-camps.

It required three bartenders to supply the wants of the thirsty patrons who crowded up to the long bar of the Palace, and they were kept jumping.

Above the heads of the moving throng within the place floated a cloud of tobacco smoke, and there was a smell of liquor in the air.

The gaming-tables were running, the faro layout doing the best business of all. The monotonous cry of the dealer could be heard at regular intervals, as he urged the players to make their game.

Among other gambling devices a "sweat-board" was really sweating those who ventured their money upon it, daring to bet against the nimble fingers of the man who was running the game, a fellow who could shift his loaded dice with such remarkable swiftness it was impossible for the eye to detect the cheat.

A roulette wheel also drew a good share of attention, but the disgusted exclamations of the losers far exceeded the expressions of satisfaction coming from the lips of those who were fortunate.

The men of Tar Heel were bucking the tiger for all they were worth, and, as usual, the beast was getting the best of it.

Among the others, Basil Rodman drifted here and there, a fragrant cigar between his lips, his keen eyes taking in all around him, a smile of contempt crossing his face at times, as he saw how steadily some of the players were being fleeced by a "skin" game.

Very naturally, the diamond-ornamented sharp attracted considerable attention. Not a few of the citizens of the place had heard of him, and his name and fame passed swiftly from lip to lip as he sauntered around.

"There goes the Sparkler Sharp! Get onto his diamonds!"

"My eyes! but they are dandies!"

"What brings him here?"

"Nobody knows, I reckon; but the chances are he is after some poor cuss. You know he is a detective as well as a gamester. He is often called the Spotter Sport."

"I have heard so. Anyhow, he is a dandy from 'Way Back!"

That is a sample of the kind of talk created by Basil Rodman's appearance in the Mountain Palace. A dozen men fell into his wake and drifted around the room after him, hoping he would take a notion to buck the tiger a little himself. But their desire was not gratified.

Basil did not seem in a mood for playing. Instead of that, he was keenly scanning the faces of every one, as if he were looking for somebody. Some of the throng noticed this, and the report went the rounds that the Spotter Sport was surely on a trail. Then everybody wondered who the unlucky man he was after could be.

If Basil was really in search of anybody in particular, it seemed that he was not successful in finding them. He finally took a seat at a little table that did not happen to be in use just then.

Barely had the sport sat down, when some one slid into the chair at the opposite side of the table, and the eager voice of Jerry Jiggers hoarsely sibilated:

"S-a-a-y!"

Basil turned with a quiet:

"Well, say it."

"You're a monumentally lucky individual!"

"Think so?"

"Think! Why, great General Scott! you can bet your last scad I know it!"

"I don't know as I understand just what reason you have for knowing anything of the kind."

"Holy poker! You act as if it were an everyday occurrence!"

"To what do you refer?"

"Why, the confounded scrape you were in when I left you this afternoon."

Basil blew out a ring of white smoke, then he scratched his head and seemed to be thinking.

"Scrape?" he muttered. "I don't seem to remember what—"

"The blazes you don't! You don't mean to say you have forgotten how— Well, may I expire!"

Mr. Jiggers fell back in his chair and gazed at the cool sport in unbounded astonishment.

"Oh, yes!" Basil nodded, after a moment of apparently perplexing study; "I remember now."

"Well, I thought you would," and Jiggers drew a long breath of relief.

"You appeared frightened."

"What, me?"

"Yes, you had that appearance."

"Oh, you must be mistaken—you really must! I was not frightened."

"Really?"

"That is, I was not alarmed for my own sake—it was for you. I must confess, I was a trifle alarmed on your account—I certainly was."

"And still you deserted me!"

"That is a harsh word—an unjust word! Business-business, sir, called me away."

Basil laughed lightly.

"I am glad it was not fear that caused your hasty departure."

"Oh, it was not—no, no!"

"That settles it."

"But how in the name of good fortune did you escape? I thought they would surely elevate your anatomy for mule-stealing."

"I have a way of getting out of such scrapes. But you had better look out."

The Man With a Scheme gave a great start.

"Me?" he exclaimed. "Do you mean me?"

"Yes."

"Why, what is the matter?—what have I done?"

"You sneaked away in a decidedly suspicious manner. If you aroused the suspicion of those fellows, they may take you for the thief."

Mr. Jiggers half-arose to his feet and his face assumed an expression of horror, while his white hat fell off and struck bottom downward on the table, where it remained. Placing his hands on the table, he leaned forward and stared into Basil's face, as he spluttered:

"You dud-dud-don't mum-mean it? Tut-tut-take me for the th-th-thief! Howling cats! But I'll just cut sticks and get back to New York! I have plenty of neckties, thank you! I have no desire for a new one made of rope! S-a-a-y!"

"Well?"

"Lend me three dollars to pay my stage fare to the next town?"

The sport laughed heartily.

"I don't believe you need go," he said.

"How is that?"

"Well, even if you did desert me in my time of need, I will stand by you."

"Is that straight goods?"

"Straight as a string."

"You won't let them hang me up to dry?"

"No."

Mr. Jiggers thrust out his hand.

"Sir, you are a brick!" he cried.

Basil smiled and accepted the offered hand. Jiggers shook heartily.

"This generosity on your part leads me to reveal to you a new scheme that flashed through my fertile brain a short time ago. I was thinking of the one I unfolded to you, when, like an inspiration from Heaven, a new thought came surging into my head like a tidal wave."

Jiggers picked up his hat, brushed it, then replaced it on his head, giving it the rakish cant be affected.

Basil settled back in his chair, muttering resignedly:

"Go on."

"Two miles to the north lay the three moun-

The Sparkler Sharp.

tains known as 'The Triangle.' Their majestic peaks are crowned with the eternal snows. Within their hearts originates the creek which flows through this town. At times, in the spring, it is said this creek becomes a raging torrent, swelled by the melting snow on the mountains. Once a flood swept through the valley. It was caused by a barrier of snow and ice far up amid those mountains. The dam—"

"Hold on! hold on! Don't swear about it!"

"Oh, I am not swearing, I assure you. As I was saying, the dam held back a large amount of water produced by the melting snow, and made a natural lake or reservoir up there amid those mountains. But gradually the dam melted away till one day it burst. Then came the flood."

"You interest me."

"I thought I would," and Jiggers rubbed his hands together with satisfaction. "Now, for my scheme. With a very small expense, a dam could be constructed that would hold in check a large lake of water every year. In mid-summer the stream that flows through this town dwindled to insignificance. With the water held in check, a vast amount of power could be brought down into this canyon. Hydraulic mining would take the place of that now carried on; mills would be built and run by the power supplied from the lake, far, far up amid the mountains. Tar Heel would bloom and blossom like a green bay tree! Best of all, dollars—bright, shining, par value dollars would come rolling into the pockets of those shrewd men who owned the dam. Ah-a! See? What do you think of it, sir?"

"I think the dam—"

"Ab! ah! Tut-tut!"

"Permit me to conclude. I think the dam would not prove a money-making affair."

Mr. Jiggers fell back in his chair and stared at Basil in pitying surprise.

"It cannot be you really think so?"

"Oh, but I do."

"Why?"

"Well, hydraulic mining might not prove practical around Tar Heel."

"But the mills—"

"Might never be built."

"Then the citizens would have to pay to have the water kept back. If they did not ante up, we would tell them the dam would be opened and the flood descend. Ha! ha! We would have them on the hip the best they could do! The dam would surely be a money-maker."

Basil was forced to laugh.

"You seem to have it figured down to a fine point," he confessed.

"You bet I have!" triumphantly nodded Jiggers. "Are you with me?"

"I will think it over."

"Well, you had better make up your mind pretty quick, for the opening may be closed. If anybody else hears of it—if by any chance the scheme leaks out and comes to the ears of the public, I shall be besieged by men of money who will desire to go into it with me."

"Without a doubt."

"Don't you think you can afford to set 'em up on that? Let's take something."

They arose and approached the bar.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LITTLE BLIND SINGER.

THE Man With a Scheme took whisky, while Basil simply accepted a cigar.

"Here's to success," said Mr. Jiggers, as he held the glass of liquor aloft and bowed to the sport. "May this dam affair make us both millionaires."

Then the ingenious individual from New York turned his nose heavenward.

Basil felt a nudge in the ribs.

"I say, boss, be you settin' 'em up?"

The interrogation was put by a genuine representative of the mining-camp bummer. The fellow was dressed in ragged clothes, and an old felt hat was pulled far down over his left eye. A stubbed beard adorned his face, and the color of his nose indicated a familiar acquaintance with "coffin varnish." He grinned cheerfully as Basil looked him over.

"Jest a bit down on my luck, boss," he explained. "Out of a job an' mighty dry. Mebbe you've bin thar, though ye don't look it. You're a jim-dandy frum ther groun' clean up—you bel' You jest take the rag off the lilac bush—yes, you do!"

"You are complimentary."

"But truthful. Like the father of this great, grand, glorious an' stupendifyin' Republic, I can't tell a whopper. My parents must have foreseen this fact, fer they named me fer thet 'lusterous statesman. My last card happens to be gone—it was the ace of spades—and I have not had time to get any more printed. For that reason I'll hev ter interjure myself in a manner that is 'really awkward atween gentlemen like you an' I. However, here goes. I am the Honorable George Washington Bumm."

"And a most appropriate name it is," confessed the sport.

"Right, sir, right! G. W. Bumm is not a bad name, though I have enemies who had the audacity to call me Genuine Worthless Bumm."

I repudiated 'em, boss—yes, I did! I'll take whisk', ef you please."

Basil nodded to the barkeeper, and Mr. Bumm received his "whisk".

Having paid the bill, the Spotter Sport turned away, and Mr. Jiggers kept at his side. G. W. Bumm gazed after them as they retreated, and no one heard him muttering savagely to himself.

Suddenly a new sound was heard within the saloon—the sound of a sweet, childlike voice in song! With a suddenness that was surprising, the hum of voices ceased. The games seemed suddenly checked, the clink of glasses and rattle of dice was no longer heard, and every one seemed listening breathlessly.

The voice was not strong, but it was like sweet and delicious music. It thrilled the rough men to the heart and caused them to hush their very breathing while they listened—listened.

The song was a pathetic little thing, and, coming as it did from childish lips, it sounded doubly touching.

"Mother, where is Minnie now—
Minnie whom we loved so well?
Will she never more return?
Has she gone beyond the clouds to dwell?
The angels wanted her to come.
We made for her a snow-white shroud,
And then they took her home to dwell
With them beyond, beyond the cloud.

"Minnie, mother's wept all day,
And her head with grief is bowed;
Now, on bended knees, we ask
To meet again beyond the cloud.

"Now my little sister's gone,
Mother, who will play with me?
Will she love me just the same?
Will she still my little sister be?
Mother, if we both are good
And try to do what'er is right,
Will they let our Minnie come
Back—from beyond the clouds of night?

"Minnie, mother's wept all day,
And her head with grief is bowed;
Now, on bended knee, we ask
To meet again beyond the cloud."

The fall of a pin could have been heard in that saloon when the song was ended. Every man seemed holding his breath and listening with an intentness that was painful. For several seconds silence reigned, then, like the wash of a wave on the shore, a great sigh swept over the throng.

Then a harsh voice broke the spell:

"Give suthin' fer ther poor little boy, gentlemen. He is blind."

The words were uttered by a cruel, haggish woman, in whose company the little singer had entered the saloon.

The little warbler was not more than seven years old. His face was pinched and care-worn and his clothes ragged and thin. There was a pitiful, appealing expression on his face that touched the heart of many a rough man. His eyes had the peculiar stare of one bereft of sight.

As the woman spoke, the little fellow took off his hat and held it out entreatingly.

Basil Rodman was the first to answer that appeal. Into his pocket went his hand, and when it came out, two bright gold pieces were clutched in his fingers. He pressed forward and cast them jingling into the hat.

"Thank you, sir," came from the poor boy's lips.

"God knows you are welcome!" and the strange sport lifted his hat from his head as he retreated.

A murmur went over the spectators—a murmur of approval.

"Hooray fer ther Sparkler Sharp!" bellowed one big fellow. "I ain't got no gold pieces ter guy ther kid, 'cause faro has nigh cleaned me out ter-night, but hyer goes my last dollar, an' I wish I hed twenty more ter send with it!"

The crowd caught the spirit, and then the money rained into that hat. Crowding, pushing and jostling, the rough fellows pressed forward and cast their offerings to the blind singer. It was a sight to make one's heart glad.

The old hag that accompanied the boy stood at one side, grinning gleefully and rubbing her bony hands together with delight.

"Look out, Benny!" she snapped, as some of the money fell to the floor. "We can't 'ford ter lose a cent! We're pore—drefful pore!"

The boy did his best to catch it all in the hat, but the money quickly proved heavy for his thin arm to hold, and once more again some of it fell on the floor.

With a snarl of anger, the old woman snatched it up and cast it into the hat, at the same time slapping the boy's ears.

"Be more keerful, I say!" she snapped.

Instantly there was a lull. Money ceased raining into the hat, then a murmur of anger passed from lip to lip.

"Ther ole wretch!"

"She struck ther kid!"

"An' he's blind!"

"She oughter be tarred an' feathered!"

The old woman was amazed. She saw scores of eyes turned angrily upon her, and she heard the fierce words which passed from lip to lip. Shrinking back, she clutched the boy by the shoulder, exclaiming, savagely:

"Ther brat is mine! I reckon I kin serve it as I please 'thout no interference!"

"Not in this yere ranch—not by a thunderin' sight!" was the retort.

"Well, I will!" she asserted, thrusting out her under jaw and nodding her head sharply. "Thar don't nobody boss me in managing this ongrateful brat!"

This caused another murmur of indignation.

"Take the boy away from her!"

"No ye don't!" and she grasped it still firmer.

"It's my own kid!"

"You hain't it's mother?"

"No, it's mammy's dead."

"Then how is ther kid yourn?"

"Cause I'm its granny. 'Sides that, here's its pap," she added triumphantly, as a dark-faced, evil-looking man slid through the crowd and took his place at her side.

The angry spectators seemed nonplused, and, during the moment of inactivity on their part, the evil-looking man secured the money that had been cast into the hat.

The blind boy had nothing to say—indeed, he looked terrified.

Suddenly a man came lunging through the crowd, boarsely shouting:

"Make room here! Let me look at that child!"

Then George Washington Bumm broke into the circle. There was a strange, wild look in the bummer's eyes, and his face seemed wonderfully changed. Down on his knees he went before the little singer, clutching the boy by both shoulders and staring wildly into his face.

"My God! my God!" came hoarsely from the man's lips.

The dark-faced man would have dragged the child away, but Bumm turned a look on the fellow that caused him to quail. Then the drunkard once more scanned the face of the child.

"It is like her face!" they heard him mutter, his breathing sounding hoarse and choked.

"Those eyes! God! those eyes! They are her eyes! He is like her! Am I mad? My head is whirling! My brain seems bursting! Air, air! for God's sake give me air!"

He arose to his feet and staggered toward the door. The throng parted and fell back before the man on whom they had ever before looked in scorn and derision. Something in his wild manner, his glaring eyes, his distorted face—something sent a feeling of awe over them.

And, swaying blindly, he reeled out through the open door and disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CLOSE CALL.

EVERYBODY seemed astonished by the singular actions of the bummer. What could have come over the man? Had he suddenly gone mad?

Basil Rodman was strangely affected. He advanced toward the little blind singer, and stooping, stared searchingly into the boy's face.

Both the old hag and the evil-faced man were uneasy and alarmed.

"Come, mother," said the man, "let's be gittin' out of here. This is a pore place fer us."

"Stop!" and Basil straightened up, his dark brown eyes fixed piercingly on the fellow's face.

"Where did you get this child?"

"It's none of your business!" growled the man.

With one stride, the Sparkler Sharp reached the fellow and clutched his shoulder.

Basil Rodman's eyes flashed fire as did the diamonds he wore.

"Then I will make it my business. Hands off that knife! I warn you not to try using it on me! I will break your worthless neck if you do!"

He did not draw a weapon, but his words and his eyes cowed the man.

"Who are you?" asked Basil.

"I am Brandon," was the reply.

"Brandon? What is the whole of your name?"

"There is no more that I know—"

"Yes, there is," quickly put in the old woman. "How kin ye be so fergitful, boy. Yer other name is Ormal—you are Ormal Brandon. An' who should know better than I, fer you are my own son?"

Then the Spotter repeated his first question:

"Where did you get this child?"

"It's my son," asserted the man.

"And its mother?"

"Is dead."

"It does not look like you."

"It looks like her."

"Then she was light—she had blue eyes and yellow hair?"

"Yes."

"She was not of your race," asserted rather than questioned the sport.

A look of fear came over the dark face.

"Of my race?" repeated the man. "What—what do you mean?"

"Oh, I know you, Brandon, though I have never before set eyes on you. Your very movements give you away—your face tells who you are. You belong to that wandering tribe of nomads who have no home anywhere on the face of this broad earth. They are thieves and child-stealers! You are a Gypsy!"

The accused shrunk and shivered. A murmur ran around the room.

"A Gypsy!"

"They're miser'ble critters!"

"Thieves and kidnappers!"

"Ten ter one they stole ther blind boy!"

Then the murmur swelled, growing louder and more startling with each moment. Ormal Brandon shrunk and shivered with fear, while the old bag began to whine and cringe. The blind boy turned its sightless eyes to the right and left, as if wondering what it all meant, but the sight only aroused the spectators the more.

Basil Rodman had not thought of arousing the mob, but he saw he had unwittingly done so. Like a flash he whirled, throwing up one open hand as he faced the throng.

"Hold!" he cried, in ringing tone. "What means this? There is no cause for a disturbance."

"But ther kid!" cried a hoarse voice. "Them critters stole it!"

"We have no proof of that. It may be theirs, as they claim. Go a little slow, gentlemen. I will see no injury done here, and my name is Basil Rodman!"

His diamonds glittered in the lamplight. His figure seemed to expand till he overtopped them all, and in him they saw the perfect production of manhood. He was one to face a thousand and never quail. The story of the manner in which he had held Horror Hank's crowd of toughs at bay had spread over the town, and there was a feeling of awe for the mysterious sport from no man knew where.

"Wal, ef ye says so, pard, in course—"

"I do say so."

"And I stand by the stranger."

The speaker advanced to Basil's side. He was six feet tall and slender, with a figure that was wiry and supple. His face was smoothly shaved and resolute. A belt of weapons was around his waist. Although a young or middle-aged man, the long hair which fell carelessly on his shoulders was iron gray—almost white. This made his appearance singular and striking.

"Ther mayor!"

The word went from lip to lip.

"Owen Sedgewick has chipped in."

"Then that settles it!"

It did. The crowd no longer seemed anxious to get hold of the old woman and the dark-faced man.

Discovering an opportunity, the Gypsies slipped stealthily away, taking the little blind singer with them. With the bone of contention gone, there was no further reason why the crowd should bother itself.

People began to move about, the bar resumed business, and the games were again in operation. The babel of voices resounded through the room, and once more the curse, the coarse jest and the harsh laugh were heard.

With but a few words to the sport, the mayor of Tar Heel turned and strode away. Basil followed him with his eyes.

"I think I have seen you before, my friend," grimly muttered the Sparkler Sharp. "I can't just place you, but there is something familiar in your appearance and in the sound of your voice. And you are the mayor of Tar Heel? Well, you will bear my attention. My trouble may be for nothing, but I will keep an eye on you just the same."

Jerry Jiggers sidled up to the sport.

"I say," observed the Man With a Scheme, "you are the worst I ever saw for getting into scrapes!"

"But I always manage to get out of them."

"You may not be so fortunate some time. And there's the money you threw into that hat! Great king! That would have gone a great long distance on that dam we are going to build. You are the most prodigal fellow I ever saw! If you intend to become wealthy, you must be more frugal, sir."

"But I have no idea of becoming wealthy, Mr. Jiggers."

"What! You don't say! But you will have to if you join your fortunes with mine."

"It looks that way!" smiled the sharp.

Basil sauntered toward a seat, and Jiggers followed. Once more they sat down at one of the tables. The sport produced and lighted a cigar. There was apparently something on his mind, and Jiggers noticed he seemed in deep thought.

"You are troubled concerning something?" questioned the self-styled rustler. "I can see it in your face."

"I am perplexed," Basil confessed.

"Over what?"

"The strange words and actions of that bummer."

"He did act queer. I reckon he must be a little daft."

But the sharp shook his head.

"I do not think so."

"Then he must have had 'em."

"The shakes?"

"Yes."

"I think not."

"Then what in blazes do you think?"

"I think he had a reason for acting as he did—a reason of which we know nothing. Somehow, there is something about the man that

seems familiar, though I cannot tell just what it is. I believe I have met him in the past, but when—where?"

"Don't ask me, for I'll never tell."

Basil leaned his head on his hand and seemed thinking deeply. There was a wondering look on Jiggers's face as he watched the man.

At length the sport shook his head.

"I am becoming more and more perplexed," he muttered. "I can almost remember—not quite. And after he had looked into the face of the child, I did so also. There I saw something that stirred this strange, painful half-memory that rests like a dead thing in my heart. Those sightless eyes filled me with compassion, but there was another feeling mingled. Oh, what is it—what is it I cannot grasp? It will seem almost within my clutch at times, but when I reach out to seize it, it eludes me and mocks me! I would give the world to have the mystery unveiled!"

"Hanged if I don't devise a scheme to unavail it!" nodded Mr. Jiggers. "I don't go in for toys to a great extent, but if there is anything I would like about now it is the world. Count me into this business bigger than a barn!"

The Spotter started and swept his hand across his eyes, then he placed the cigar between his lips and puffed vigorously.

"I suppose I was muttering my thoughts aloud," he said. "It is a habit I have fallen into, and it is a mighty bad one, too. I don't like it, but I can't help it, for I will forget myself."

"That's bad, bad!"

"Admitted."

"I must get up a scheme to rectify it. In fact, if you travel with yours truly, Jerry Jiggers, Esq., he will devise schemes to correct all your faults. I tell you I am a valuable article to have around the house."

"I should suppose so. I suppose th y always leave when they find you are there?"

"They? Who?"

"The rats."

Jiggers looked astonished, then he broke into a laugh.

"Oh, yes, I see!" he chuckled. "That's a joke, and I am the joker. Oh, well, it's all—Hello! Great Christ-mas!"

The report of a revolver was heard somewhere outside the saloon, and then a bullet cut Basil Rodman's cigar in two close to the sport's lips, burying itself in the wall.

It was a close call, but the Sparkler Sharp was unharmed.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO WOMEN AND A TRAMP.

LIKE a flash, Jerry Jiggers leaped to his feet, fear plainly expressed on his face.

"Excuse me!" he exclaimed. "Somebody seems trying a little fancy shooting. Sorry I can't stop to see the exhibition, but pressing business calls me away. See you later, sir."

And the Man With a Scheme beat a precipitate retreat.

Basil had also risen to his feet, and a revolver appeared in his hand. His flashing eyes searched for the spot from whence the shot came, and they soon found it.

Toward an open window he sprung, regardless of the fact that a hundred eyes were turned inquiringly on him. With the revolver still grasped in his fingers, he leaped through the window into the shadows outside the building.

Basil seemed to have the eyes of an owl. Most men would have been blinded by the sudden change from light to darkness, and a lurking assassin would have had them at his mercy.

Not so with the Sparkler Sharp. His keen eyes penetrated the shadows, and he was ready for action the moment his feet touched the ground.

The big round moon was creeping up over the eastern mountains, but its light did not reach the spot where the sport stood. That was in the shadow of the Mountain Palace. Other buildings close about made more shadows, and these the man searched for the sneaking assassin who had attempted to take his life.

He foun !—nothing.

"The cur lost no time in escaping," came through his set teeth. "He fled like the cowardly dog he is! If he had been a man, he would never have fired that shot; and if he had been an expert with the revolver, he would not have missed. I am thankful for that anyway."

With the revolver still ready for use, his left hand resting on his hip, he stood listening to the sounds that came from the saloon. Through the open windows he could see the moving throng, and the babel of voices came to his ears. Something like a contemptuous smile curled his lips.

"What fools we mortals be!" he quoted. "This is life in the West—life amid the mines! It is exciting enough, that is sure, but what a miserable life it is. Look at those poor fools in there 'gambling away their earnings, vainly hoping to have a run of luck! A run of luck! Bah! They are not playing against chance; they are playing against fraud and trickery! There is no such thing as an even show for them! They are certain to lose in the end."

"And I—I am called a sport! I make my

living at games of chance, for I match trickery with trickery. I can tell a square game when I strike it, and then fortune and a clear head stand me in good stead. I almost always win in an honest game. I seldom lose in a game that is crooked, for all the tricks are known to me. It is not easy to deceive my eyes."

"I do not fancy the life, but it aids me in bringing criminals to justice. I have a detestation for anything that is wrong, and my life-object is the baffling and punishment of crime. Evil men are getting to know and fear me, and I have enemies."

"Enemies! I have one enemy who is relentless. He follows me everywhere, and strikes at my life whenever he gets an opportunity. Who he is I do not know. I have never knowingly looked in his face. Like the vile assassin he is, he lurks in the dark and tries to strike me from behind! Twice within a few hours he has struck at my life—once through hired tools and once through a party unseen, perhaps himself."

"I would like to meet that creature face to face—man to man. After such a meeting he would trouble me no more, for one of us would pass in his chips."

"I have wondered who this unknown enemy of mine can be. It must be the friend of some criminal whom I have been instrumental in bringing to justice. I can think of no other explanation. In some way I must learn the truth—I must force this secret foe to meet me. If I do not—well, he will not always fail in his purpose. Some time I shall go under without so much as a chance to strike a blow in defense."

For a few minutes he was silent, standing like a black statue in the shadows. He seemed to be thinking, and at length, he fell to muttering again:

"What is there about my past I cannot fully remember? It seems to be faces and names that trouble me the most. I will sometimes remember faces all right, but I cannot recall names or tell when and where I saw those people. That was far back, at least six or seven years ago—perhaps more. It was then this trouble came that broke my memory. For six years back I can remember all, and then there is a blank apparently of many years. And still—and still—"

He passed his hand across his forehead, as if trying to brush away a cloud.

"I am still a young man—I cannot be thirty. The blank cannot have lasted many years, for I was twenty when it came about. Oh, that cursed affair! I wish I could remember just what happened. I know there was trouble, but over what? I know I killed somebody—who was it?"

He threw out a hand with a gesture of despair, then he walked toward the street. Just before he reached it, he halted and drew back, an exclamation breaking from his lips.

A female figure was passing in the moonlight. She heard the sport's exclamation and looked quickly around, but she only saw a dark form in the deep shadow, for he had quickly retreated from the moonlight. At the same moment he saw her face fairly.

"Great Heaven!" he gasped.

The woman hurried on.

"That face!" hoarsely whispered the man. "Can it be her? It is changed—so changed! And yet—it may be! I will follow—I will learn whither she goes."

Like a shadow, he was after her, taking pains not to be seen by the one he was following. There were few people on the street, and the moon gave the only light.

As if in great haste, the female figure flitted onward. At times she looked back, but then Basil took care to be concealed by the shadows. She seemed to fear being followed. He wondered why she was out upon the street at such a time. It was dangerous in a wild camp like Tar Heel.

To the very outskirts of the place went the lone female. There she reached a cabin, and only paused to unfasten the door before she disappeared within.

Basil was about to approach the cabin, when, to his unbounded surprise, another female figure seemed to rise out of the very ground, not far from the door beyond which the first had vanished.

"This seems to be a night for 'em!" grimly muttered the trailer. "I will watch this one and see what she is up to."

Taking precaution not to be seen, he kept his eyes on female No. 2. She acted strangely, the sport thought, for she walked back and forth in front of the cabin, seeming in doubt. Twice she approached the door, as if to knock, then turned away.

Slowly Basil crept nearer. He wished to get a look at her face. He seemed drawn onward by a great desire.

The woman was dressed in black, and there seemed something familiar about her.

"Can it be the same?" he murmured. "Oh, for a look at her face! Ah!"

His wish was granted. She turned so the moonlight fell fairly on her features, and he saw them quite plainly. He was forced to bite his tongue to keep back the cry that arose to his lips.

It was the same woman in black that had

The Sparkler Sharp.

passed him on the trail when he was entering the town with Jerry Jiggers.

"It is she!" he whispered. "And that face is so like—so like that of Doris Lenoir! Can it be? No, no, no! It is folly for me to think of such a thing! And even if it were she, what then? She is nothing to me! Her heart is false—false as Hades! Another has a claim on her!

"Ahl but is that true! Another? She is in black! My God! I understand it now! The bond is broken! Another no longer claims her! He is dead!"

There was something like wild joy in Basil Rodman's words, and for a moment he came near forgetting himself. There was a rushing, roaring sound in his head, and his memory seemed to give him back something long forgotten. The mists were not entirely swept away—they only lifted for a moment and allowed him to look back into the past. That one glance filled him with a strange mingling of emotions, but horror was predominant.

"Dead!" came from his drawn lips. "What if he is dead? She could be nothing to me! I remember now! My hands are red with blood—his blood! She would only loathe and despise me! She would flee from me as if I were a poison serpent! He stood up before me so handsome and brave, and I shot him down like a dog!"

"But what bad he done?" hissing the words with savage fury. "Betrayed as pure a girl as ever breathed—led her into a mock marriage! When he tired of her, he cast her off—left her to die with a baby girl in her arms! The dastardly dog! I do not regret I took his life! It was a better fate than the wretch deserved!"

"But his treacherous act ruined my life! Yes, I can remember now; I wonder shall I ever forget again? Never before for years has it come to me so plainly as at this moment. The sight of that face—the face of the woman I loved long, long ago has brought it all back like a flash. And still—still there is—or seems to be—something I cannot remember. What is it? what is it?"

All this time he had been watching the Woman in Black, and all this time she had been standing or pacing in front of the cabin. She seemed sorely perplexed about something, but she little imagined whose eyes were upon her.

In vain Basil Rodman questioned himself. There was something that still remained a blank. What was it?

"The cloud has fallen again," he sadly murmured. "I cannot penetrate it, no matter how hard I may try. I must wait for it to lift. The shadows are growing deeper, and the figures getting more blurred in my brain. Heavens! am I to forget again? Is it all to slip away and remain a blank till something shall lift the curtain once more? I fear so! I fear so!"

Suddenly the woman turned from the cabin and came toward him. He retreated into the shadows of a building close at hand.

"She must not see me," was the thought that passed through his head.

She did not. With bowed head, she passed and walked on.

He came out and followed.

"I must know whither she goes. To-morrow I will learn who she is."

With as much caution as he had exercised in the first place, he kept track of the woman. But all his caution was wasted, for she did not seem suspicious of being followed. She walked deliberately along, never glancing back.

The woman did not pass through the heart of the camp, but skirted its outer edge. As she was moving along, a figure suddenly reeled out of the shadows and confronted her.

"Hold ri' up, m' pritty!" commanded a thick voice. "I jesht wan' a word wish you."

The woman halted, a little cry of fear breaking from her lips.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she demanded.

"Tha's business," nodded the man, as he swayed unsteadily. "You are a womansh of business—yesh you be! You shee, I'm in need —hard up. Don't I look it?"

He certainly did, for he was a most disreputable-looking specimen of the genus tramp. The rags which he wore would have disgraced a scarecrow. And his breath smelled strongly of whisky, which alarmed the Woman in Black more than anything else.

Torusing back his crownless old hat, he put one hand to his unsheaved chin, and seemed vainly trying to steady himself in that manner. He grinned in a way that was intended to be cheerful and reassuring.

"Mebbe you don' know me?" he inquired. "Well, tain't sho mush ter be wondered at, fer I bain't bin 'round these parts a great long time. You shee, I'm a trevellersh, I am. I go here, zere an' ev'rywhere. I'm unforchernate, leddy—hain't got no home. Oh, it's a shweet thing to have a home, an' it's turrible ter be 'thout any! Excuse me while I shed a few briny tears."

Then he wiped his eyes on his coat-sleeve and sniffed in a way intended to be affecting.

"What do you want?" the woman asked once more.

"Only jesbt a little help, leddy—jesht'nuff ter git a square dri—a square feed, I mean."

"Well, here you have it."

She held out a piece of money to him, and he made two grasps before he succeeded in securing it. Then he bowed in a manner that came near sending him sprawling.

"Thankee, leddy; you're a brick, you be! Fer this I will reward ye with a kish."

With remarkable suddenness he caught her in his arms. She screamed and tried to get away.

"I won' hurt ye," protested the tramp.

"Release me! Let me go, you wretch! Help! help!"

Her cry was answered. A manly figure sprung to her aid, and in a moment the tramp was sprawling on the ground.

"Lie there, you dirty dog!" cried Basil Rodman's ringing voice, as he supported the terrified woman on his arm.

At sound of those words, she started and stared into his face. Then a wild cry broke from her lips, and in an instant she sprung away. Like a frightened fawn she sped from the spot and quickly disappeared.

CHAPTER X.

UNCLE JAGGS THINKS HE "HAS 'EM."

"SHAY, mishter," and the tramp sat up, a grin of delight on his fat face, "I'm gosh-dinged if you didn't git left, too! Why, that's th' mosht ginerous-hearted an' at ther shame time ther contrariesht feemalesh I ever shet my eysh on—yesh, shir! Why, she even wouldn't let a good-lookin' fellersh like you kish her!"

But the Sparkler Sharp did not seem to hear the vagabond's words. His eyes were turned toward the point where the Woman in Black had last been seen, and he stood with his hands clinched, his teeth set.

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed the tramp, attempting to arise to his feet and falling back while he vented his merriment. "I know I hain't party—I don't go no great shakes on my beauty, so it doesh my heart good ter shee anozzer handshumer mafo git left shame ash I did. Th' female wash a stunner—no 'stake 'bout tha'. But she washn't lettin' hershelf be kish thish evenin'—no, shiree!"

With considerable trouble he succeeded in getting on his feet, and then he stood before Basil, hat in hand, as he bowed with attempted respect.

"You're a Shim-dandy, mate," he declared. "Your shtyle ish 'mence! Dunnash I ever shaw your beat—guesh I never did. I hope you'll 'scuse me fer not havin' my besht close on when I shpeak ter ye?"

"What did you mean by insulting that lady?" sternly asked Basil.

"Shultin' her?" gurgled the vagrant, in evident amazement. "I never shulted her—never! I onlysh wanted ter kish her."

"Which was the greatest insult you could have offered?"

"Shir!" and the ragged fellow drew his fat figure up with dignity. "It ish evident, shir, you do not know me!"

"I must confess I have not that honor. Who are you?"

"I ush ter be ther Reverend Getegood Jagon, but my name was too much fer me, shir—it wash my ruin," and the vagabond began to gurgle and sob. The boyish alwush pronounced it Get-a-good Jag-on! Tb' little wretches would howl to me in th' sitreet an' ask how I would like to *to get a good jag 'n'*! That name, shir, drove me to ruin. The queshtun made me think I'd like ter know how it really would feel ter get a good jag on, sho one day—one evil day!—I indulged in shum likker. Oh, pitty my feelinsh, shir!"

At that point the vagrant broke down completely. For nearly a minute he wept profusely. Finally, he continued;

"I became intozzerated, shir, and I wash sheed by members of my shurch. It was my ruin! They fired me because they discovered I wash loaded. From that moment my coursh hash been downward. Now you can shee what I am. I am known as Old Uncle Jaggs. Behold how hash th' mighty fallen!"

Again he wept.

Somehow, Basil's feeling of anger toward the ragged wretch was banished by his tale of woe.

"Come, come!" said the sport. "Get a brace on!"

"Tha's jesht wh' I want," asserted Uncle Jaggs, suddenly drying his tears. "Where'sh th' nearesht shaloon?"

"Follow me and I will lead you to it."

"All ri', mate. Shay, you're a brick, you be!"

Basil led the way, and the tramp followed as well as his shaky legs would carry him. Now and then he entreated the sport not to walk too fast.

Straight back to the Mountain Palace the Sparkler Sharp returned, and Uncle Jaggs followed him through the open doorway. There he paused and stood blinking like an owl on whom a sudden flood of light had been turned.

"I wondersh where zer bar?" he muttered, as he put out his hand and stealed himself by the aid of the wall. "Shings sheem ter be takin' a whirl in here. Ever'shing's goin' whizzity-whew. I wonder whersh th' bar?"

No one answered his question, but after a

time he found his way to the bar. During all that had transpired, he had clung firmly to the piece of money given him by the Woman in Black. He now slapped it down on the bar, gurgling triumphantly:

"Whisk!—whisk, I shay! Give me forty-rod. I wan' sunshin' zat'll kick like blazesh at th' britch an' kill a clean mile frum ther muzlesh. Trot'er out!"

The barkeeper seemed to take in the man's condition at a glance.

"Go on!" he said. "You are full to the nozzle now."

"Confoundedsh lie!" blustered Uncle Jaggs. "Guesh I know when J'sh full! Gimme whisk', I shay. Don' be puttin' on any airsh, young fel?"

"You'll see snakes before morning," declared the bartender.

"Oh, come off!" snorted the tramp. "Me shee snakes! Well, za's good! Why, I've swallered burrils an' burrils uv coffin varnish, an' I never shaw a snake yet. Gimme whisk'."

"Look here, we don't want you to get down in here."

"Hain't goin' ter git down. Gimme whisk'."

"You'll get killed."

"Won't nuther. Gimme whisk'."

"All right, if you will have it, but I'll bet a dollar you see snakes before morning."

"Wish I hed a hundred dollarsh, young fellersh; I'd putt 'em 'ginst tha' dollarsh uv yoursh. Gimme whisk'."

With a gesture of impatience, the barkeeper flung a glass twirling along the bar, then he whirled and took down a bottle. As he did so, he paused an instant to coil something and press it into the hollow at the bottom of the bottle. Uncle Jaggs did not notice this.

"There you have it," and the barkeeper placed the bottle carefully before the tramp. "Now go ahead and poison yourself."

The dispenser of liquid refreshments had winked at several of the bystanders, and many eyes were on the ragged vagabond as he reached out a shaking hand for the neck of the bottle. He had to make three passes at it before he succeeded in clutching it.

Then he lifted the bottle, when—presto!—out from beneath it darted a squirming, lifelike green snake.

The tramp's eyes threatened to leap from their sockets. A look of terror flashed over his fat face, and he gave a wild yell. At the same moment he dropped the bottle, started backward, lost his balance and sat down on the floor with a crash.

"Oh, great jewhazzlin' jinks!" he squawked, as he wildly clutched at his hair. "I've got 'em! Snakes! Whoop! I've got 'em! Somebody ketch hold uv me an' hold me fast afore I do damage! Look out fer me! Give me lots of room! By gosh, I've got 'em at last! And I reckon I've got 'em bad!"

"What's the matter with you, you fool?" demanded the barkeeper, gathering up the rubber representation of a snake and thrusting it out of sight under the bar. "What are you down there for yelling in this way? You are creating a disturbance."

"I tell ye I've got 'em," protested Uncle Jags, excitedly. "I'm dangerus! Look out fer me!"

"Got what?" innocently inquired the perpetrator of the practical joke.

"Snakes!" whined the vagabond, as he labored to his feet. "I saw one right thar on the bar. Where's he gone?"

"There is nothing here but the whisky you wanted. Come take your drink, man."

But the tramp soberly shook his head.

"Naw," he said, "I don't want no drink. Excuse me; I bain't nigh so dry as I was." And, securing his piece of money, he turned away from the bar, his intoxication seeming to have vanished before his fright.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT BASIL FOUND WITH HIS Winnings.

"LIFE is but an empty bubble," mused Uncle Jaggs, as he piloted himself from the bar. "Man needs but little drink below, and he ought to have it right along. The poet says somethin' like that, an' real ginoowine poetry is fine stuff, you bet! Ther poet was right, but w'at's a feller goin' ter do when he gits ter seein' snakes? Echo answers in slantin' capital letters—WHAT?"

It was plain the vagabond was filled with dismay, but the sight of the lifelike-appearing snake had sobered him remarkably. He walked quite straight, and the words he uttered did not sound as if his tongue was thick as a plank.

In getting away from the bar the tramp came upon Mr. Jerry Jiggers. The Man of Schemes was standing with his feet quite wide apart, his hat thrust back on his head and a horribly black cigar between his teeth. Uncle Jaggs nearly ran him down.

"Beg pardon, mate," and the vagabond touched his hat with a gesture that seemed to tell of better days. "I didn't see you."

"You should purchase a pair of spectacles, my friend," loftily asserted Mr. Jiggers, as from one corner of his mouth he puffed a volume of smoke into the tramp's face.

"Oh, say!" cried Uncle Jaggs; "there hain't no ticks on me. I don't need ter be smoked like a ham."

Mr. Jiggers surveyed the vagabond critically.

"I fancied you needed fumigation," he said, apologetically. "I see now it is soap and water you stand in greatest need of."

"Sir," and Uncle Jaggs assumed an air of injured dignity, "you are exceedin' offensive!"

"That's what they used to tell me when I was in politics. They'd say 'Come off the fence if you want an office.' You remind me of something."

"Um?"

"Yes."

"Well, you need re-mindin'. It's plain yer present mind is purty well used up."

"Sir!"

"Oh, you needn't apollygize; I understand."

"Apologize! Sir, you are the one to apologize!"

"Is that so? Well, I hain't looked at it in that light. You started it, an' I kem in on ther home-stretch. Purty darned hard work ter distance yer uncle. I'm one of ther git-thar boys!"

"You look it."

"So?"

"Yes, you have that general appearance. So does the dirt to be seen about your person. Not only does that git there, but it stays there with both feet."

"Well, I'd like to know how you knew there was dirt on my feet? They can't be very bad, fer I took a bath a year ago last spring."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"Did it make you sick?"

"Yes, it did. You see, it was an accident."

"I might have known it."

"I was tryin' ter cross a bog."

"An' you fell in?"

"Prezicly—fell inter muck clean up ter my neck. Stayed there two days 'fore some fellers came erlong an' pulled me out. First bath I'd had for four years, an' I caught cold."

"I should have thought you would! Did you wash the mud off your person after you were extricated from your perilous position?"

"No, I didn't wash. I've heerd say watter's injurious ter ther complexion. I took some chips and scraped the mud off."

"Say, I've just thought of a scheme."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"Can you think all alone without enny help?"

"Oh, come off! Listen to my scheme; it will make us both wealthy."

"Is that so? Then let her slide. I hain't greedy ner covertbus, but I dunno 's a little wealth 'd do me enny harm. I'll lend you my ears for the time."

"Never mind that; I don't care to be taken for a jackass."

"Then you should keep your mouth shet."

"Sir!"

"Sir?"

"I will not be insulted!"

"You are right, you never will be. It'd be impossible ter 'sult ye."

"I can lick you, sir—lick you like a dog!"

"An' a dawg alwus licks people with his tongue."

Mr. Jiggers seemed bursting with rage, but he suddenly cooled down.

"Will you listen to my scheme?" he asked.

"Yes; let 'er flicker."

"I will purchase a tent—"

"Where'll you get the scads?"

"Of my valet, sir, the person yonder who wears the diamonds," and Jiggers pointed toward Basil, who happened to be sauntering past at a distance. "I will purchase a tent and advertise the greatest show on earth—the only living human being who never washed. Then I will take you round and exhibit you. The bills will read like this: The Great Unwashed—the Dirtiest Man in Existence! A Wonderful Creature Encrusted by Dirt! Have Your Handkerchiefs Perfumed and Keep Them over Your Noses While Gazing at this Wonderful Being. He is Half Human and Half—"

"Sir," roared Uncle Jaggs, "I can knock the corners off you in less than ten seconds!"

"Keep your hands away!" exclaimed Mr. Jiggers, backing off precipitately. "I do not wish to go to the expense of purchasing a new suit of clothes. Think over the scheme and let me know if you are in it. Good-evening."

Fuming wrathfully, the tramp made his way in the direction he had seen Basil Rodman moving.

"Same feller I had ther little fracas with," he muttered, aloud. "I guess he's got ther rocks, so I'll strike him fer a stake."

He found Basil at the faro-table. The sport had taken a notion to try a whirl with the tiger, and he was playing an even sort of game. His keen eyes were fixed on the slender fingers of the dealer, and he seemed to know what card was coming before it was pulled from the box. He was winning more than half his ventures.

Uncle Jaggs took his place behind the Sparkler Sharp, and the vagabond's eyes glistened greedily as he saw Basil's pile of chips steadily grow larger.

As the minutes passed and the Spotter con-

tinued to win, Uncle Jaggs became more and more excited.

"Say," he finally ventured, in a hoarse whisper, "why don't ye straddle ther board? Ef you did, you'd bu'st ther bank wide open in jest a little bit of no time. You're on it bigger'n a wolf, an' it's your solumn juty ter crowd ther mourners. In this here kind of business a man can't hev any feelin's fer other folks. This is boddle or blood, ev'ry time!"

Basil did not heed the tramp's words, if he heard them. He continued to play the same kind of a game he had started in with, and luck stood by him.

After a time the sport pushed some chips over the board and asked to have them cashed. His request was promptly granted, but he did not pocket the money. He let the little pile of bills and gold-pieces lay at his elbow and continued playing.

Twice Uncle Jaggs bent forward to touch the lucky man on the shoulder, but each time he restrained his desire. The look of wondering greed increased on the tramp's broad face as the Sharp's winnings became greater.

"Ef I hed that luck I'd own ther world in a week," he declared. "I'd never let up. Strange I couldn't hev been born lucky as well as han'-sum!"

And still he attracted no notice. He muttered of being hungry and thirsty, and said something about snakes. He observed that a little bit out of the sport's winnings would save him from ruin and despair, but Basil did not seem to hear him.

When he could stand it no longer, the vagrant bent forward the third time, touching the Sharp's shoulder,

"You'd never miss it, mate," he mumbled, "an' it'd give me a powerful lift. You know I'm down on my luck, an' I'm gittin' more hard knocks then anythin' else. I don't want ter rob ye, but—"

"What do you want?"

"Jest a little lift, mate—w'at ye kin afford."

"You will get a lift, if you don't get out of here," asserted the dealer.

But Basil picked a five-dollar gold piece from his winnings and handed it over his shoulder to the tramp, saying:

"Take this and slide."

"You bet!" and the tramp lost no time in doing as advised.

"You have broken your luck," observed a bystander, speaking to the sport.

"Think so?" asked Basil.

"I am sure of it."

It seemed the man was right, for from that time on the sharp's losses were a little more than his winnings. Gradually his pile of chips dwindled until nothing remained but the sum he had received for those he had cashed.

"Well, that is enough for to-night," he remarked, and gathering up his winnings, he left the table.

He did not count what he had won, but just as he was thrusting the money into his pocket a slip of white paper among the bills caught his eye. He saw there written upon it—only a few words, but they were ominous:

"Next time you surely die. YOUR DEADLY FOE."

CHAPTER XII.

BASIL SEEKS INFORMATION.

BASIL RODMAN had arrived at the belief that there were several people in Tar Heel City concerning whom he desired information. Foremost among the number was the Woman in Black.

After a refreshing night's sleep, which he enjoyed despite the repeated attempts on his life and the threat on the slip of paper found with his money, he ate a hearty breakfast and started out from the hotel.

He had fully determined to explore the town and thus get the "lay of the land." Something told him it would be to his advantage to do so.

For two hours he wandered about the place, taking in everything of interest and making himself fully acquainted with the town. He desired to ask questions, but for a time he did not find any one he wished to question.

Finally, when he was returning to the hotel, he saw an old fellow sitting in the open doorway of a small shanty, smoking a villainous black pipe. Basil was immediately struck with a resolve to question the man, for he had the look of an old inhabitant.

The old fellow looked up with mild surprise expressed on his face as the dashing sport approached.

"Good-morning, sir," saluted Basil.

"Howdy, stranger," was the retort, as the old man took the pipe from his mouth, closed one eye and surveyed the sharp still more closely with the other.

"Fine day," observed Basil.

"Huhah!"

The retort was in no way compromising; it might mean "yes" or it might mean "no."

"The air is bracing."

"Humph!"

There seemed to be disgust in the expression, but Basil was not certain.

"Tar Heel is quite a city."

"Bosh!"

There was no mistaking the meaning of that retort.

"You don't think so?" smiled Basil.

"Naw; Tar Heel hain't no city. That's only putt on ter fool outsiders an' draw in emmygration."

"You do not seem to think much of the town?"

"Who said so?" There was something resentful in the old man's manner, but he still continued to survey his questioner.

"I inferred it from your manner."

"Then my manner guv me ther lie. I bain't no galcot ter go back on my own town. Critter thet'll do that oughter be lynched!"

"I agree with you."

"Ugh!" Another grunt.

Basil drew forth his cigar case.

"Will you try one of my cigars, sir?"

The old man shook his head, but his coolness began to disappear before Basil's free and easy air.

"Ther old pipe's good ernough fer my styl'," he asserted.

"I never did take ter terbarker rolled inter ther kind of shape. Tried ter smoke one ef them things once, but durned ef it didn't make me sick! Them'll do fer sech fellers as you, but a man wants suthin' diffrent."

Basil laughed, without the least sign of being touched.

"Every one to his fancy, sir. I haven't a doubt you get more enjoyment out of that pipe than you could out of a cigar, while I should not enjoy it at all. It is all a matter of taste. Can I trouble you for a match?"

"S'pose ye kin," was the reply, but he made no move to produce one.

"Then will you let me have one?"

"I reckon."

He fished around in his pocket and produced a broken match, which he passed to the sport, observing:

"Man bes ter be ekkynical now'days ur go ter ther wall. Tain't ever'buddy as kin sport shinners, pard. Whar'd ye git 'em?"

"Earned them."

"Humph!"

There was no doubt about it this time; the expression was one of disgust.

Basil lighted a cigar.

"You seem to doubt my word, sir," he said.

"Looker byer, pard," returned the old fellow, "I reckon you're one of them card-sharps!

"Mako a livin' by fleecin' other galoots as is blamed fools ernough ter play with ye!"

"I never yet fleeced a person out of a cent."

The old man arose to his feet with difficulty, revealing the fact that he was troubled by rheumatism.

"Say," and he looked Basil straight in the eyes, "are you givin' it ter me straight, pard?"

"Straight as a string."

"Reddy ter take oath ter it?"

"If necessary."

"An' you are a sport?"

"So called."

"Take my seat. You're ther fu'st one of ther kind I ever saw that w'u'dn't rob his gran'marm ef ther old lady wuz starvin'!"

Basil was forced to smile at the old fellow's manner, but he declined the seat.

"Keep your seat, sir; you are the older. I can stand well enough."

"Thar's a stun thar; try that."

The Sparkler Sharp sat down on the stone, which was close by the door, while the old fellow slowly and painfully settled back into his seat.

"Ye see I'm jest knocked out, pard," he observed. "This yere derned roonytiz is gittin' ther best of ther old man! I've got ter knock under afore long, I reckon, but I'm goin' ter keep kickin' long as I kin git feed an' clo'se ernough ter keep me comfortable like. I've allus been a purty durned hard ole nut ter down, an' I'm goin' ter guy death a powerful tussle afore he floors me."

"You seem ter be kinder new roun' these yere diggin's. I don't member of seein' ye afore. Been in Tar Heel long?"

Basil saw the old man was at last in a talkative mood.

"Since last night," was the reply. "I have been out looking the place over this morning."

"So? Waal, w'at yer think of it?"

"Looks like a smart town."

"Waal, it is right smart, though it might be a good bit smarter. Howsumdever, I low ther time's comin' w'en ther place will boom. It's got ter! Didn't mount ter shucks w'en I fu'st kem hyer; now look at it! Ther boom's comin'!"

tell ye anythin', pard," he said; "but I'm blowed ef you hain't struck me foul ther fu'st lick!"

"Then Sedgewick—"

"He's er riddle."

"But he is popular?"

"Yep."

"Must have had some influence to have become mayor?"

"Ther influence of a six-shooter."

Basil smiled.

"He did not compel the town to accept him as mayor, did he?"

"Nop."

"Then how did his gun have anything to do with his obtaining the office?"

"Waal, ye see Red-nose Rufe wuz a mighty bad man, an' he 'lowed he wuz chief of Tar Heel. Three ur four other bad men 'tempted ter straddle his neck, but he throwed 'em cold. He made his brags that he c'u'd jest nacherally lick any man livin'—'lowed John Sullivan ur Bat Masterson wuzn't in it with him. He wuz handy with his dukes an'er derned sight handier with his guns. He let on that he'd run ther town jest as he pleased, an' he done so. Didn't nobody durst say his soul wuz his own w'en Red-nose wuz round. People wuz skeered of him. W'en they saw him comin' they jest got right out of the road. I tell you that cuss kerried tiings with er powerful high ban."

The old man puffed nervously at his black pipe as recollections of Red-nose Rufe's aggressive doings aroused his anger. His little eyes snapped, and he continued:

"Thet critter hed things jest as he wanted 'em fer four months. People 'lowed ther town wuz ruined ef it didn't git rid of him, fer outsiders heerd 'bout Red-nose an' steered clear of Tar Heel. But how wuz they ter git shut of ther chief? Thet wuz w'at bothered 'em, an' it bothered 'em mighty bad, I tell you! 'Bout this time Sedgewick struck ther place."

The narrator took the pipe-stem from between his lips, closed one eye and peered down into the bowl with the other. Then he mumbled something about smoking wind, thumped the pipe gently on the door-stool, and seemed waiting for something.

"Sedgewick delivered the people, did he?" asked Basil.

"You bet!"

"He licked Red-nose?"

"Hev ye bin 'roun' ter Tar Heel's plantin'-ground?"

"No."

"Ther boasted chief has a corner lot up thar."

"He attempted to lay out Sedgewick?"

"Yep; an' right thar wuz whar he made his mistake. He axed him ef his hair wuz bleached. Sedgewick was mild an' quiet like an' so Red-nose decided ter knock ther stuffin' outer him. Waal," laughed the old settler, "he struck a cyclone. Ther white-haired feller jest pounded him all over ther street. Then Rufe reached fer his gun. He got one shot, but his narves wuz shaky frum ther punchin' he'd got. Ther bullet only grazed ther stranger's cheek, an' ther next minute Sedgewick's lead made a nice clean hoel through Rufe's heart."

"And then—"

"Waal, ef ever a man wuz given an ovashun, it was Owen Sedgewick. Ther hull dad-derned place jest rose right up an' called him blessed. Afore night he wuz 'lected mayer by a unanimous majority."

"And he never disclosed anything about his past life?"

"Nary thing. Why, pard, Tar Heel don't even know whar he kem frum last afore he struck this town! He ain't much on ther talk, but he makes a mighty good mayer. Thet's all ther place wants. Tain't none of our business w'at he done afore he kem hyer. He may hav bin a convic' ur a congressman fer all we know. I don't 'low ther town'd go back on him an' throw him out of office ef they actually foun' out he'd bin in Congress. Thar be tiings wuss than thet, heap sight."

Basil agreed with the old man.

"There is another person I wish to ask about—a woman."

"Who am she?"

"I do not know her name, but she dresses in black."

The old fellow nodded.

"I know who ye mean," he declared. "Thar bain't but one female in Tar Heel that dresses in black. She's young an' good-lookin', I 'low?"

"Yes."

"It's ther widder."

"The widow?"

"Yep; ther Widder Dalton. She owns ther Twinklin' Star 'Mine."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BUMMER'S ASTONISHING ASSERTION.

THERE was a strange look on Basil Rodman's face, but the old settler did not notice that. If he had, he would not have understood the meaning of it.

For some moments silence rested between the two men, then the sport spoke, his voice sounding a bit unnatural:

"This widow must be well fixed!"

"You bet!"

"How long has her husband been dead?"

"Nigh onter a y'ar."

"Has she had any suitors since his death?"

"Sooters—w'at's them?"

"Any lovers?"

"Haydoogins of 'em."

A look of pain flashed across the handsome face of the Sparkler Sharp, then it became stern and hard set.

"Who is the favored one?"

"Thar hain't none."

"She favors no one?"

"Hit it dead center, pard."

"Who is the most persistent one among them?"

"Ther mayer."

"Ah?"

"Yep; he seems boun' ter git thar."

"But she holds him off?"

"So blamed fur he don't like it."

Something like satisfaction glowed in the dark eyes of the Spotter Sport.

"What caused the death of her husband?"

"Mountun fever."

"And his business?"

"Ther widder took charge of that, an' she's proved that she hain't no slouch, bet yer boots. She keeps things runnin' jest erbout as they oughter run, an' that's why so many of Tar Heel's citizens are dead stuck on her."

"Where did Dalton come from?"

"Somewhar East. He wuz er tenderful w'en he struck Tar Heel an' bought ther Twinklin' Star. Some said he'd got bit powerful bad, but it turned out that he hadn't, fer a new vein wuz struck short time arter he tuck it. Ef he wuz a tenderful, he had a powerful clear head, an' he made ther Star pay him well fer ther capital invested. He wuz shrewd."

"Where does the widow live?"

"Back along ther trail yen. It's ther cottage that's all kivered with vines an' flowers. Mebbe you notissed it?"

"I did."

"She lives with only jest one ole woman fer comp'ny."

"And is never molested?"

"Naw; she owns a gun an' knows how ter use it."

"Well, there is another woman I wish to ask about."

"Let her went."

"She lives on the very outskirts of the town in a small cabin-like structure."

"Which way?"

The sport told him.

"Must be ther Mystery," muttered the old settler.

"The Mystery?"

"Yep; that's w'at we call her."

"Why do you call her that?"

"Cause she is a mystery ter ther hull town. Nary blamed soul knows much of anythin' 'bout her, 'less it is Owen Sedgewick."

"Sedgewick seems to figure in everything about this town."

"Perty nigh ever'thin'," confessed the old man.

"How is it he knows more about this Mystery than any one else?"

"Don't ask me, fer I'll never tell. I can't tell ye much of anythin' 'bout her 'cept that she kem ter town in a powerful sing'ler manner."

"How was that?"

"Nobody knows. Fu'st any galoot knowed 'bout her she wuz hyer livin' in that place whar she is now."

"And the place—how came she by it?"

"You tell! It berlonged ter ther mayer. He bought it jest a short time afore ther Mystery 'peared."

"Then it seems as if he knew she was coming?"

"Mebbe so; mebbe not."

Basil scowled and seemed perplexed. Plainly there was much about the strange affair that bothered him. For some moments he pulled savagely at his cigar, quite unaware that it had gone out. The old settler was the first to notice this, and he offered the sport a match.

"Best have a little fire connected with that, pard, ef ye want ter 'joy ther smoke," he said.

With an expression of thanks, Basil accepted the match and lighted the cigar.

"How does this woman live?" he inquired.

"You'll hav ter ask me suthin' easier. She hain't never seen outside ther cabin but once ur twicet. She jest keeps herself housed up thar as ef she wuz 'fraid of bein' seen."

At this mo'ent Wild Bess rode past the cabin. The girl was mounted on a handsome milk-white horse, and her cheeks were flushed with a healthful color, while her dark hair streamed down over her shoulders. A charming spectacle she presented, and it was little wonder a glow of admiration filled Basil Rodman's brown eyes.

The mountain beauty saw the sport and waved her hand to him. He returned the salute by lifting his hat.

"So ye know her, do ye?" grunted the old man on the door-stool.

The assent on the word "her" brought a flash of resentment across Basil's face, and he wheeled on the settler.

"Yes, I know her," he answered. "What of it?"

"Oh, ye needn't git huffed, partner! I hain't makin' no 'sinuwations."

"I fancied you were by the way you spoke."

"Nary time! She's a brick, is Bess!"

"Perhaps you can tell me something of her?"

"All thar is ter tell, I reckon."

"I shall be glad to hear it. Who is she?"

"Ole Bristol's gal."

"Who is he?"

"He was a prospector."

"What is he now?"

"A spook."

"He is dead?"

"As Adam."

"What did he die of?"

"Too much bug-juice."

"How long ago was that?"

"Two years."

"Did he have any property or wealth?"

"Some. He wuz purty well fixed once-struck a pocket 'mongst ther mountains an' tuck out a heap—but drink pulled him down. Ef he'd lived much longer, he w'u'dn't bed a dollar left. It wuz a good thing fer the gal he died w'en he did."

"How has she lived since his death?"

"All erlone with herself. Ther ole man owned a cabin back yere in the hills, an' she lives ther. Bess kin take care of her own self, you bet!"

"That I am sure," answered Basil, arising. "And now I think you must need a rest, for I have crowded the questions to you pretty thick. I have to thank you for the information you have given me."

"Don't mention it, pard," said the old man, heartily. "I've alwus bin dead sot ag'in your class, but hanged ef I don't take ter you! I reckon you're a man to tie to."

Again the sport thanked him, and the old settler told him to call around again when he needed any more points. Then Basil bade him good-morning and walked away.

"There seems to be an unlimited amount of mystery about the people of Tar Heel," he muttered, as he swung along down the street; "and here comes another mysterious individual now."

It was George Washington Bumm, and the fellow looked decidedly woebegone. He would have passed Basil without speaking, but the sharp blocked the road.

"Hold on, my friend."

G. W. shook his head.

"Don't try ter play that on me!" he sadly said. "I hain't got a friend in all this wide world!"

"I don't like to contradict a gentleman," said the sport, "but I must in this case. You have a friend in me."

"You!" cried the bummer—"you! Ha! ha! You are no friend of mine! You are an enemy!"

Basil was astonished.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Just what I said!" was the savage reply.

"You are the worst enemy I ever knew!"

CHAPTER XIV.

BUMM'S STORY—THE MEETING.

IT would be difficult to describe the amazement of Basil Rodman as he listened to the bummer's words. In a moment he became doubtful of the man's sanity.

Mr. Bumm looked him square in the face, and for a moment it floated vaguely through the sport's head that he had seen the man's eyes somewhere before he entered the town of Tar Heel. But the memory was of the baffling sort that had troubled him so much of late.

"Are you crazy, man?" he asked, and his hand fell on the mendicant's shoulder.

Like a flash, Bumm struck the hand away.

"Don't touch me!" he cried, furiously. "Keep your hands off!"

For a moment it seemed as if the wretched man would fling himself at the sport's throat, but, in his utter consternation, Basil made no move to defend himself. For that very reason the attack was prevented. The shabby man's eyes fell, and a sudden change came over him.

"You have

possible, as if he did not care whether school kept or not.

"You are a queer kind of a fellow," said Basil. "Have a cigar?"

"A cigar? Me smoke a cigar? Well, that's good! Why, I haven't smoked a cigar for years!"

"Well, smoke one now," and the sharp held out his open case.

"Thankee, boss; don't keer ef I do. Why, I'll sling on more style than a dude! A cigar! Ther people of Tar Heel will think I have struck a bonanzar."

He hastily gnawed off the end, and then he fished a match from some part of his clothing. In a few seconds he was pulling at the cigar in a deliberate fashion, and haniling it in a way that indicated he had been there before. Basil watched him closely and decided that, no matter what G. W. Bumm was at that moment, he had once been a gentleman.

"You were not always in bard luck?" the sport ventured.

"No," and there was a decisive shake of the head. "I have seen better days, boss—yes, I have! I once was considered some shakes, but that was long, long ago."

"What was the cause of your downfall?"

"Love!"

"Love?"

"Yes."

"That is strange."

"Think so?"

"I certainly do."

"All ther same, that was what knocked me out, boss. Now, don't ask me ter tell ye 'bout it! I don't feel that way."

"All right. I do not wish to pry into any of your secrets. But you did act very strange in the saloon last night. What was there about that little blind boy that so worked on your feelings?"

"I was drunk, boss," bluntly asserted Bumm.

"That may be, but you saw something in the face of that child that aroused you to the excitement you displayed."

For a moment the mendicant hesitated, a look of pain or remorse showing on his face, then he replied:

"Ye're right, boss, I did see something there—something that reminded me of her. She is dead—dead an' gone years ago. It's my wife I'm speakin' of, boss, fer I bev bin merried. We never lived tergether. Fate—cruel fate parted us!"

Basil saw there had been a romance in the past life of this worthless and homeless man.

"I hain't goin' ter tell ye all, boss," Bumm went on, tears in his eyes. "It's like tearin' open an old sore 'way down deep in my heart. She was beautiful, an' I loved her. She had blue eyes and golden hair. I swore I would protect her from all harm, and I meant to keep that oath if ever man meant ter do right. I don't know how it came about—there was a lyin' tongue at ther bottom of it. He made her believe I had treated her falsely. Poor girl! She fled I knew not where. In vain I searched for her. For more than a year we were parted. Then I found her."

Tears were running down Bumm's cheeks and his whole body was shaking with emotion. Basil was strangely affected.

"She was dead!" the mendicant continued, slowly. "That was in New York. Her body had been found floating in the East River, and I saw her at the Morgue. I knew her, although she had changed. She was lost—lost to me forever! I had a little money, and claimed the body. It rests in a decent grave away there in the East."

"From the day of her burial till the present time I have been a wanderer on the face of the earth. Whenever I can, I go back there and visit that grave. Some time I expect to die there upon it."

"That's all my story, boss," and Bumm's manner changed as swiftly as his language. "Ther little blind kid minded me of her somehow—he! her eyes an' her hair. That's what made me act like I wuz daft."

"Say, my cigar has gone clean out. Wonder ef I've got another match? Ah, yes, here she am. Now I am fixed. But I must be movin', boss. Sorry I can't stay with ye longer, but my time is pressin'. Sassiety takes up a great deal of my 'tention, an' it's necessary fer me ter make several formal calls. I uther make calls in my better days. I made a call once when I held four ten-spots. There was about seven hundred dollars on the table. T'other feller had four Jacks! Good-day."

Basil watched Mr. Bumm as that worthy walked away, and the mendicant put on a swaggering air that seemed to indicate he owned the bigger portion of Tar Heel.

"A strange man," mused the sport. "I cannot quite fathom him. It is plain he is in bard luck, and I reckon he told a straight story. Yet how many bummers are there in this country who would have refused money if offered them? At times his language is correct and his manner polished; at other times he speaks after the manner of the lower class and his actions are those of a genuine mendicant."

"Why is it his face and voice seem to touch

a chord of memory somewhere in my breast? Is it possible that he was in any way connected with my past life? And his savage declaration that I was his worst enemy still perplexes me. It does not seem as if those words were entirely caused by drink."

Something led Basil to turn back and follow Mr. Bumm. But in a short time, he fell to musing, and before he knew it, the man in whom he was interested had disappeared. Still the sport walked onward, his head bowed.

"I beg your pardon."

He started and looked up at sound of that voice. He was face to face with the Woman in Black!

An exclamation of surprise was forced from the Sparkler Sharp's lips, then he stood bowing, hat in hand.

The woman's large dark eyes were fixed inquiringly, almost fearfully, on his face.

"You are the gentleman who saved me from insult and harm last evening?"

Her voice trembled strangely. Basil felt his heart pounding painfully in his breast. Twice he essayed to speak before his lips uttered a sound.

"I bad that honor and pleasure, madam."

"Then it is my duty to thank you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Rodman—my name is Basil Rodman."

She fell back, as if she had been struck a blow.

"Rodman?—Rodman?" she murmured, hesitatingly. "I thought—I fancied—"

She did not tell what she thought. With an effort, she checked herself. With a visible effort at getting her nerves under control, she said, speaking with forced calmness:

"My action—my sudden flight after your gallant act must have seemed very strange to you."

"Not at all," he hastily assured her. "I think I understand what your feelings were at that moment."

"I was thoroughly frightened, and my only thought was to get away. I did not think of my rudeness toward one who had done me such a great service."

"I fancy you put a high estimate on the little favor I had the satisfaction of doing you. I assure it was of no consequence."

"You may look at it that way, but I do not," and she shrugged her shapely shoulders. "Just think of it! The man was a tramp, and he was intoxicated! He would have kissed me! Sir, your act is one for which I fear I shall never be able to repay you."

"I am more than repaid by knowing I was able serve one so charming."

Like lightning a flash of color mounted to her face.

"Thank you," she said, simply. "If you will call I shall be pleased to see you. Come any time. Here are directions for reaching my house."

She gave him a piece of pasteboard and bowing, turned away. He lifted his hat and stared after her till she disappeared. Then these words burst hoarsely from his lips:

"I knew it! There is no mistake! She is Doris—my Doris!"

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE GYPSY CAMP.

In the heart of a bit of timber about four miles from Tar Heel stood an old canvas-covered wagon, and near at hand a raw-boned white horse was munching at some cut grass. On the ground a short distance from the wagon burned a small fire, over which, by means of forked sticks, was hung a very black kettle.

Beside the fire crouched a bag-like woman, who was smoking a short black pipe and humming a mournful tune. It was the old woman who had appeared in the Mountain Palace Saloon with the little blind singer the previous night.

Beneath the wagon, his head pillow'd on a rolled blanket, was her dark-faced companion—her son. He was enjoying the pleasure of a mid-afternoon nap.

Nowhere about the place was the blind lad to be seen.

The old woman sung and mumbled to her heart's content. The fire crackled and smoked, threatening to go out at times, then blazing up brightly just when the old woman was beginning to growl and anathematize it. The horse munched steadily at the grass, and the sleeping man beneath the wagon snored peacefully.

It was a scene for an artist.

At length the old woman cried:

"Hey, Ormal!"

The sleeper did not stir.

"Hey, Ormal!"

He only snored the louder.

"Satan take him!" she mumbled, angrily. "It takes a thunderbolt to awaken him once he falls ter sleep! Here, you fool!"

As this did not arouse him, she arose, picking up a stout stick that lay near. Making her way to the wagon, she gave the man a savage punch in the ribs.

"Wake up, you log!" she snapped. "You would sleep yer whole life erway ef 'twasn't fer me! Git up an' eat suthin'!"

He arose, grumbling.

"That is ever the way!" he declared. "Barely do I get to sleep when you awaken me!"

"An ef I hadn't, you would have raised a row when ye did wake up an' find ther stew cold."

"Then you have prepared something to eat at last?"

"No thanks ter you! I hed ter do all ther work; you wouldn't even bring a stick of wood. If it wasn't fer that ongrateful brat, I'd work my fingers off fer you an' git no thanks. Ther blind brat helps me some."

The man only mumbled and growled.

From the wagon the old woman produced some tin plates and pewter spoons. Then she removed the kettle from its hook and placed it on the ground.

"Dive in," she said.

"You must help me, mother."

She snatched the tin plate from his hands.

"You are so helpless, you'd die ef 'twasn't fer me!"

But she filled the plate and passed it to him. Then she filled one for herself, and they sat down on the ground near the fire.

"That was a great haul you made last night, mother," observed the man, after they had nearly satisfied their hunger.

A chuckle came from the old hag's lips.

"Right ye be, my pretty boy! We're in luck! That brat will make our fortunes!"

"Make our livings. That is all we can ask. Fortune! Bah! What is fortune to a Gypsy! All we ask is enough to eat and a wagon for a home. Then we can rove the world over. We are travelers, mother. This staying cooped up in one spot may do for other races, but it will never satisfy a Gypsy."

"Ye're right, Ormal, as ye'most alwus are. It is very proud of you yer old mother is."

"There, there! You know I do not care for flattery—especially, your flattery."

"You should care for mine more than all others. Am I not ther mother of ye?"

"That's why I do not care. If you were a young and beautiful girl now—one with whom I was in love—well, it would be different."

The old hag's eyes flashed.

"I s'pose so!" she cried. "You'd transfer ther fection you should feel fer me ter her, and I—What of me?"

"You'd be left, old woman," was the brutal reply.

The woman ground her yellow and decayed teeth together in a savage manner.

"Well, it hain't best any pink-faced beauty comes between me an' my son!" she snarled.

"Ef there does—I'll strangle her!"

"You will do nothing of the kind."

"But, I say I will!"

"And I say you won't."

"What'll prevent?"

"Why, you poor old fool! do you think I would let you bother me?"

She fairly gasped for breath.

"What—what do you mean?"

A cruel, heartless laugh came from his lips.

"Simply that you would be disposed of."

"Ormal!"

"You named me that."

"Would ye kill yer own mother, boy?"

"Only for her own good. That would prevent you from staining your old bands with blood."

There was a look of horror in her eyes, but once again he laughed.

"Don't be foolish, old woman!" he coarsely advised. "I have not fallen in love yet, and I never may while you live, for it is sure you can't live long."

Tears appeared in the wretched mother's eyes. Was this her son—her own boy whom she loved so much? Yes, yes! And he coolly talked of putting her out of the way!

"Oh, Ormal!"

She tried to clasp him about the neck, but, with a savage exclamation, he thrust her away.

"Old age is affecting your head," he declared.

"You did not use to be like this."

"But you are all I have now."

"Faugh!"

"It is true. I know I shall not live long, but it's hard on me fer ye ter throw it in my face. An' then ter tell me ye'd put me out of ther way fer a pink-faced beauty—yer old mother! I am crushed!"

"I see you are," was the unfeeling retort; "the juice is running."

He paid no heed to his mother's tears, and she soon dried them, but there was bitterness in her heart.

"Please may I come out now?"

It was the voice of the blind boy, and it came from within the wagon.

"What do ye want ter come out fer?" snapped the woman.

"I am so tired of staying in here," was the plaintive reply. "And I am hungry, too. I can smell something good to eat. Oh, please can I have something to eat?"

The appeal might have touched a heart of stone, but the woman was not moved.

"Somethin' ter eat!" she mocked. "Ye're alwus wantin' somethin' ter eat! Here!" as the boy appeared at the rear end of the old wagon.

"Who told ye you could come out?"

He hesitated and turned his sightless eyes toward her.

"You did not say I couldn't—and so—and so—"

"An' so, an' so! Well, you'll wait till I say you can. Do ye understand?"

"Oh, let the kid come out!" put in Ormal. "What do you want to keep it in there all the time for?"

"Who's takin' care of this child?"

"Nobody."

"Is that what you call me?"

"You're not taking care of it."

"What am I doin'?"

"Trying to starve it to death, and you ought to know better. Hasn't it proved a gold mine to us?"

"Starve it! As if I would! But the little wretch wants to be eatin' all ther time! It is never satisfied!"

"You don't give it enough at a time."

"Oh, I don't! Perhaps you know more about young ones than I do!—Here, you whinin' brat! git out ef ye want ter!"

"Thank you," and the unfortunate child made haste to take advantage of the offer, seeming to fear she would change her mind.

Once on the ground, it groped its way toward the fire, an appealing look on its pinched face—a face that might have been most attractive under other and more favorable circumstances.

The old woman watched the boy as a cat watches a mouse, seeming ready to pounce upon it and shake it. There was an evil light in her eyes and a nervous twitching of her hands.

"It smells so good—so good!" murmured the blind lad, as the aroma of the stew came to his nostrils. "I wish I might have some! There is such an empty place here in my stomach that it makes me feel sick all over."

"Oh, it does, hey! Makes ye feel sick, hey! Ye're a greedy little wretch, that's what ye be! You know you're a greedy little wretch!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You want ter be eatin' all ther time!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You know you're never satisfied with anythin'!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Well, I'll let ye have a little of this stew."

"Oh, you're so good!"

"Course I be! I hadn't oughter bothered with ye at all, but I've taken keer of ye like you was my own child."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You know you're ongrateful."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, here's your stew. There is just enough fer ye. I only let ye have so much, fer I know it'd hurt ye ter eat too much. It'd surely make ye sick, an' we can't have no sick kid on our han's. Are ye thankful, you little beast?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She had dipped out some of the stew in her own dish—a scanty amount—and passed it to the boy. When he asked for a spoon, she vented a snarl and gave him her spoon. Then he fell to eating in a most ravenous manner.

Oram lighted his pipe, and lay looking on in an indifferent manner, as if he had no care about what took place.

It did not take the hungry boy long to dispose of the small amount of food he had been given. All the time he was eating the old hag watched him with envious eyes.

"Please, ma'am."

The boy spoke in a timid, fearful manner.

"Well?"

"May I have a little more—just a little?"

A snarl of anger came from the old woman's lips.

"More!" she cried. "Why, you are a reg'ler pig! More! You have eaten enough for two men, now! You know you have!"

"It doesn't seem as if I had eaten much," was the faltering reply. "It was so good—so good!"

"An' you want ter make yerself sick by eatin' more! Rich food is not good fer chil-d'en. No, you can't have any more!"

She snatched away the plate, and the blind lad's chin began to quiver.

"Now don't ye go ter snufflin', if you know when ye're well off!" hissed the old woman. "I'll give ye a poundin' ef ye do!"

"I—I'll try not to, ma'am," he said, brokenly.

"But it is such a hard thing to be hungry! Sometimes in the night I am so hungry I cannot sleep. It seems that there is something gnawing in my breast. Sometimes I think there is a living creature in there that is eating me. It is terrible, terrible!" and the poor little fellow covered his sightless eyes with his hands.

Something in his manner enraged the old hag, and she flew at him, fairly screaming:

"You little wretch! You would make it out we do not treat you well! You know you lie—lie, lie! I will fix you!"

Then she began beating the poor unfortunate with her fists, while he sobbed and shrieked with pain and fear.

"Squeal, squeal!" she laughed, with fiendish glee. "It does my ears good ter hear ye! I'll beat you within an inch of your life!"

"Oh, no you won't!"

It was a strange voice, and a heavy hand was placed on the old hag's arm. She started back with an exclamation of dismay and anger, finding herself face to face with a portly man.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CHIEF RASCAL APPEARS.

"LET that child alone!" commanded the man. "What are you trying to do—kill it? If so, take a decent way to do so, Mag."

"It's Mr. Malcome!" cried the old woman, in consternation.

Brandon, the Gypsy, had sprung to his feet and seemed about to assault the intruder, but his mother's words caused him to suddenly change his mind. In a moment he was bowing and smiling before the portly man.

"So it is Mr. Malcome!" said Ormal. "We are delighted to see you, sir."

"Humph!" grunted the new-comer, who was very well dressed and appeared like a person of some influence. "I see you can lie as easily as ever, Brandon."

"Lie, sir?"

"That's what I said. And you, old woman, you are as ugly as you used to be."

"Ugly, Mr. Malcome?"

"That's what I said. I believe you are the confoundedst ugly old wretch I ever saw."

The old hag bowed, forcing her wrinkled face to smile, but there was a flash of anger in her small, beady eyes. If the new-comer saw this, he did not mind it. Evidently he had dealt with these people before.

"Oh, you won't let her beat me any more, will you, sir?" sobbed the boy, reaching out blindly to grasp the clothing of the person who had interfered with Old Mag's punishment.

Mr. Malcome took good care to avoid those thin white hands, but he said, reassuringly:

"She shall not while I am ar-round."

To this the old hag said nothing, but she inwardly determined the blind boy should catch it when Malcome was gone.

"What brings you to this part of the country?" asked the portly man.

"You know we wander wherever we choose," answered Brandon. "We came here by chance."

"Now, is that so? I never know when to believe you. I thought perhaps you were looking for me."

"Oh, no, no!" assured the man and woman in a breath.

"No? Well, I am glad to hear of it. I told you I never wanted to see you again."

"We did not hunt you out; you came to us."

"Is that the way you look at it? Well, perhaps it is so. But, what about this child? You have not done as you agreed."

"We have kept it out of the way."

"You were to put it out of the way."

"Well, haven't we?"

"No."

"Surely it has not troubled you?"

"But it might."

"How?"

"It is not necessary for me to explain to you. I hear you appeared in camp with it last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"That thing must not occur again!"

Mr. Malcome uttered the words in a very decisive manner, making it plain he was in sober earnest. The man and woman exchanged glances.

"There is a reason for this?" questioned Brandon.

"To be sure."

"What is it?"

"That is none of your business. I have paid you well for what you did in the past, but you have not kept your promises in full. Now, you must do as I tell you. There can be no fooling about it."

He looked sternly at them both, but neither spoke.

"There are reasons why I do not want this child seen in Tar Heel. You have made enough out of me to have some respect for my wishes, have you not?"

"Oh, yes, yes!"

"Then you will get away from these parts as fast as you can and as soon as you can."

"But—"

"There are no buts about it! Do as I say, and all will be right; refuse—"

"What then?"

"All will be wrong," answered Mr. Malcome, very coolly.

"What will you do?" demanded Brandon.

"You will discover to your sorrow."

"Do you threaten us?" and the Gypsy's hand fell on the hilt of a keen knife.

"Now go slow, Brandon," and Malcome calmly raised one hand with a gesture of warning. "I am not fooling with you, and you hadn't better draw a knife on me. It will be a bad thing for your health."

There was something about the portly man's placid manner that caused the angry Gypsy to quail. For a moment the two looked into each other's eyes, and then Ormal's gaze fell before the other's.

"I fancy you understand me," said Malcome. "At least, you ought to understand. I heard of your appearance in the Mountain Palace Saloon last evening, but I must say I had a devilish hard time to find you to-day. You were not well received in the saloon?"

"Well received!" put in Old Mag. "It was more than a hundred dollars we took. I call that a good reception."

"But you did something to anger the crowd?"

"Attempted to make this brat mind, that is all."

"I hear you struck it. You ought to know the rough men of these wild Western camps have wonderfully tender hearts. They will not see anything abused, rough though they are themselves. If you were caught pounding the child as I saw you a few minutes ago, you would stand a good chance of being lynched."

"What business is it to them what we do with the brat?"

"They will make it their business. Tar Heel was greatly aroused last night, and you might be used rough if you should appear in the camp again. It is better for yourselves, as well as for me, that you get out of these parts as lively as you can."

"I s'pose you'll give a little suthin' ter help us erlong?" inquired Mag.

"Not a red," was the prompt reply. "You have got your last cent out of me, and you bled me in good shape. You have gall to ask me for money, when you made more than a hundred off the child last night!"

"You know it takes a heap ter travel."

"It must—it must take a heap to travel in your style!" and the portly man laughed. "And the way you feed, too! I'll bet that stew did not cost you a quarter!"

"Well, what of it?"

"Nothing. I don't care how you live, but I do care where you live. That's what's the matter with me. Now, I must be getting back to town, and I want to warn you once more against appearing there again. Get a move on you and make your way to other parts."

"I don't suppose you would come down heavy to have the kid done for?" hinted Ormal.

"I paid for the job once, and you failed me; I am not going to do so again. I told you you would get nothing more out of me, and I meant exactly what I said. I am not rolling in wealth, by any means."

"You once had enough."

"That was in other days. Times change, you know, and we change with them. Remember what I have told you, and I sincerely hope I may never see either of you again."

With this, Mr. Malcome turned and walked calmly away, soon disappearing from sight.

The Gypsies watched him till he had vanished, then Old Mag leaped forward and one claw-like hand fell on her son's wrist.

"He don't want ter see us ag'in!" she hissed. "Well, he shall! We got money outer him once, an' we'll do it ag'in! He's got it! he's got it! Foller him, my boy, an' see jest where he goes. Be shrewd—be shrewd!"

"Trust me for that, mother," was Brandon's reply, as he shook off her hand. "I will track him to his hole."

And then he moved swiftly and cautiously after the portly man.

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. BUMM GETS "RILED."

For some minutes there had been an unsuspected witness to all that passed within the Gypsy camp, and that witness was none other than George Washington Bumm. The mendicant had followed Mr. Malcome to the spot, but he did not make his presence known while the portly man was talking with the Gypsies.

Just how Mr. Bumm had happened to follow Malcome, and just why he was there, it would have been difficult for him to explain, had he been called on to do so.

As her son darted away after their late visitor, Old Mag rubbed her skinny hands together and chuckled in a repulsive way.

"Ar-r! so we have found him!" she mumbled.

"We have looked fer him long, an' we've foun' him at last. He said I was ugly as ever, did he? Well, he shall find he is right! I won't fergit them words! He paid us well ter do his dirty work once, an' he'll have ter come down with ther rocks ag'in. We know how ter handle him. This hain't ther fu'st child I've stole fer folks as hired me ter do it!"

Sue seemed unaware of the blind boy's presence, but she did not long remain so.

"Did you steal me, Granny?"

"It was the blind boy who asked the question. The old woman stared at him in surprise.

"I thought I belonged to you," the little fellow went on, innocently. "I didn't know you stealed me."

"Ob, ye didn't!"

"No. Where did you steal me? I don't seem to get all this through my head."

"Well, 'tain't best fer ye thet ye do! What business have you listenin' ter w'at I'm sayin'? I'd good mine ter give you a poundin'!"

The Sparkler Sharp.

"But you always call me a worthless little wretch."

"An' so you are. You're no good ter anybody! I should think ye'd want ter die!"

"Sometimes I do want to die," answered the weak little voice. "It isn't very nice to live when it is dark all the time and one can't ever see the sunlight and the pretty flowers."

"Or-r, the pritty flowers!" mocked the old hag. "You little whinin' baby! How I hate ye—hate ye!"

"That is another thing that makes me want to die," was the touching assertion. "Nobody loves me; everybody seems to hate me. And I am whipped so much! It's not always the pain on my body that hurts the worst; but there is a great big pain in my heart. Sometimes I think it is bursting! Oh, Granny, Granny!" and the wretched little blind waif burst into tears; "if you'd only love me a little, I'd be so good! I know I am blind and cannot always see to do the work you want me to, but I would try. Then there would be something to make me want to live. And—and if I could sometimes have all I wanted to eat—"

For a moment it almost seemed as if the cruel woman was touched, but at the mention of something to eat, her anger burst out anew.

"That's alwus your song!" she snarled. "As if we could 'ford ter be feedin' ye all the time! You've got ter be kept poor an' thin in order ter be worth anythin' ter us. People'll give money twice as quick ef ye're poor as well as blind. You don't seem ter have no thought of our wants; yer only thought is fer yer own greedy little self! But I'll break ye of it, ur I'll break yer neck! I wasn't half done with ye w'en Malcome stopped me, so I'll finish ther job now."

The poor boy tried to creep away from her on his hands and knees, but she quickly caught him, laughing heartlessly at his pleading. Then she began to beat him.

That was too much for George Washington Bumm to endure, and he charged on the old woman. Catching her by the neck, he gave her a snap that nearly broke her back.

"You infernal old bag!" he cried, and there was a ring of indignation in his voice that actually made him appear manly. "You ought to be tarred and feathered! I'd like the privilege of putting on the tar! Beating a blind child like that! By thunder! I've a good mind to use you in the same fashion!"

After her first surprise, the old woman rallied and turned on her assailant, a perfect torrent of execrations coming hissing from her thin lips. Her attack was like a cyclone, and for a few moments the mendicant had his hands full.

"Oh, you're a cat, are you?" he cried. "I see your claws are sharp. I reckon they need clipping, so I will attend to the job."

The old woman screamed and raved, her beady eyes glowing and her lips covered with foam, making her appear like a wild animal.

But, Mr. Bumm proved himself a strong man, for he soon overpowered her and cast her to the ground. Then he deliberately proceeded to bind her hands behind her, all the time advising her to take it easy. But the woman continued to scream until Bumm, having made her hands and feet secure, forced a gag into her mouth and tied it there.

"There, old lady," he observed, as he drew himself up and surveyed his work with satisfaction, "now you are nicely done for, but this is not half what you deserve. If there is anything that will stir me up and get me riled it is to see a child treated the way you were treating this one. I'm blowed if hanging isn't too good for the human being that will treat a boy that way!"

During the struggle the blind boy had been crouching on the ground, intently listening, terror written on his face. He now started up as Mr. Bumm approached him.

"Don't be afraid of me, youngster," said the man. "I wouldn't harm you for the world—no, not for the whole world, and Heaven knows I need a little real estate bad enough!"

"What have you done to Graney?" asked the boy.

"Trussed her up securely."

"But you have not hurt her—oh, I hope you have not hurt her!"

Bumm looked at him in astonishment.

"Why do you hope that?"

"Because it is such a dreadful thing to be hurt. She doesn't know what it is to be hurt bad."

"Then it's time she found out, for she has pounded you enough. I'll tell you just what that old bundle of sin and ugliness deserves, and that is a hickory tonic."

"What is that?"

"It is a remedy applied to the exterior of the body, my son—applied with a hickory switch. But I want to talk with you, boy, so we will go out here a bit where the old woman can't hear what we say."

He tenderly picked the lad up in his arms and carried him a short distance. Then he sat down on a stone, placing the boy on his knee and gazing long and earnestly into the lad's face.

"Too bad! too bad!" he muttered, sorrowfully. "Can't you see at all?"

"No, sir," and a sob broke in the boy's throat.

"I can never see the bright sunlight and pretty flowers any more. I can feel the sunlight and smell the flowers, but I can't see 'em, sir."

"It's an infernal shame!" and Bumm wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "You talk as if you had seen the sunlight and the flowers!"

"Oh, yes, sir; but that was long ago—so long ago!"

"How comes it you are blind? Your eyes seem to be all right."

"I don't know, sir. There was a quarre one day—Granny and father fought. It was over me, and I was struck on the head, then all was dark. I didn't know any thing for a long time, and when I did at last, it was still dark. It has been dark ever since. Do you think it will always be dark for me, sir?"

"No, no, no!" came hoarsely from the man's lips. "It will not always be dark! There is a land where it is light to everybody who is fortunate enough to go there. It is a bright and happy land, my boy."

"Oh, do you think I will ever go there?"

"I am sure of it!"

"But how can I find the way if I cannot see?"

The man strained the child close to his breast.

"God bless your heart!" he said, brokenly. "You will not miss the way when the time comes to go up there. The Heavenly Father will take you by the hand and lead you all the way. He takes special care of little blind children."

"He must be awfully good! And you—I know you are like Him!"

"Me!" cried the mendicant, in consternation. "Like Him! Oh, you do not know what you are saying!"

The blind boy put up his thin hands and felt carefully over the man's bearded face.

"But you are good!" he protested—"I know you are good! I love you!"

And now the tears forced themselves from Bumm's eyes.

"You—love—me! Child, child! you are twining your fingers around my heart—my poor old broken heart! It has been long years since I heard human lips utter those words—'I love you!' She spoke them long, long ago! Sometimes now she comes to me in my dreams and whispers them. Then I will reach out my empty old arms and try to touch her, but she will not be there and I will know I am alone in the world—alone, alone!"

"Where is she?" asked the blind boy, simply.

"She has gone to that Land of Light of which I told you."

"Then you will meet her there some time, for you have good eyes and can find the way."

The man broke down and sobbed like a child.

"I fear not," he sadly said—"I fear I have lost the way forever."

The blind boy's arms crept around his neck.

"Don't cry!" he entreated, beginning to sob in sympathy—"please don't cry! It hurts me so to have you cry, for you are the kindest man I ever knew. I wish you were my father."

CHAPTER XVIII. BRANDON GETS HIT.

THAT broke the mendicant down completely. He clung to the sightless child as if he would never let it go, while he cried:

"I wish I were! I wish I were! But I never had any little chick to call me father. And I should not make a fit father for you, my boy. I am not worthy to be your father!"

"Not worthy? I do not understand you, sir."

"I suppose not, but I am a worthless old wretch who does not amount to anything. I don't know why I did not die years ago!"

"Please don't talk that way!" entreated the blind lad. "I don't like to hear you talk so! It hurts me!"

"Hurts you? Then you may be sure I will be careful how I talk, for I do not want you to be hurt. You have been hurt enough, I fancy. What is your name?"

"It is Ben, sir?"

"Ben? What else?"

"Blind Ben."

"But I mean what is your last name?"

"That is all the name I have, sir."

"Oh, no; surely not! You have another name."

"Then Granny never told me."

"The old hag! She is no relation to you, my boy!"

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Sure enough, Benny. She stole you from some good people who are probably mourning you as dead. Perhaps your father is a rich man, my boy. Oh, I know those Gypsies stole you!"

"I think you are right," said the blind lad, very slowly. "Only a little time ago Granny said I was not the first child she had stolen."

Mr. Bumm gave a cry of exultation.

"That settles it! She has no more right to you than I have! How would you like to leave her and her rascally son, Benny?"

A doubtful look crept over the boy's face.

"Leave them?" he hesitatingly asked.

"Yes, go away where they would never find you—where you would be free from them forever."

"Where could I go?"

"With me."

"With you?"

"Yes."

"And Granny'd never beat me any more?"

"Never again."

"I should like it."

"Then by gingerl you shall go!"

The little fellow clapped his hands.

"And you will be my father then?"

"As good a father as I can, Benny."

"And you will not beat me very often?"

"Beat you very often! Boy, boy, if I ever raised a hand to strike you I should hope God Almighty would paralyze my arm! Strike you! Only brutes could do such a thing! No, I would never strike you! You would be something for me to live for! I would go far away from the temptations that have been dragging me down, and I would begin a different life. Never again should a drop of liquor pass my lips! I would go to work like a man, and after a time we would have a cozy little home. You could stay there and mind it as well as you could. At night when I came home from work we would talk together and you could sing to me. You would make me think of her. She had golden hair and blue eyes—sweet blue eyes! I believe your voice is like hers! Perhaps, child, you could lead me back to the right path—the path that leads to the Land of Light and to her!"

"I don't think I understand. How could I lead you when I am blind?"

"You will understand by and by. Is it settled that you will give up this roving life and go with me?"

"Yes, sir, I think so, if it will be right for me to leave Granny. If she did not beat me and I could have all I wanted to eat, the life would not be so very bad, for I love the air, the birds and the flowers."

"You cannot see the flowers, little one."

"No, but I can smell their sweetness, and I love them, even though I cannot see them. And the birds that sing so beautifully—would I have to give them up, too?"

"No, no, Benny; you should not give them up! Our home shall be in a little grove where the wild birds will come and sing all the day."

"And a brook—a little brook? Shall there be a brook run close by?"

"As sure as you want it."

What a look of joy flashed over the blind lad's countenance!

"Oh, I love the brooks!" he cried. "Many, many times we stopped by the brooks, and when Granny was not watching, I have crept down close to them where I could lay and listen. Did you ever listen to a brook? It laughs and it sings. Sometimes it will be so happy! Then, at other times, it will sob and moan as if it were so very sad. I have listened to its sobbing till it seemed as if my heart would break, and the tears have run from my eyes even though I tried to hold them back. It would seem so like something human! I have wondered if it was cold and hungry and if any one had been beating the little brook."

"Oh, you dear little good-heart!" half-laughed, half-sobbed the man. "It is strange you should have such thoughts, after being brought up in such a manner! That is enough to tell you are no child of the Gypsy."

"If I go with you, shall I always have enough to eat?"

"Always, if my strength can earn enough. You shall be first in my thoughts."

"Oh, that will be so grand! It has often seemed that I could never get enough to eat. I am not very strong, but I will do all I can. I will bring the wood and water, and build the fires. And to think of living in a house all the time!"

"Have you never lived in a house?"

"Sometimes, in the winter. It was better than living out of doors then, though I had to sleep on a bed of straw, and there were great big cracks in the floor, where the cold wind and the snow would come in."

"Poor little wai! Yours has been a hard lot, indeed. Blind and homeless, living with cruel people, dragged over the world, starved, beaten—it is a wonder you are not dead!"

"Sometimes I have thought it would be nice to die: but now—"

"Now?"

"I do not want to die, for I am with you."

"God bless you! Your words go straight to my wretched heart—your touch is like a balm! Now that I have decided to take you with me, and change my mode of life, I feel more like a man than I have felt for years and years. I feel a new strength—a new impetus! There is something in the world to live for. But we must be getting out of this, little one."

"Let's go!" came eagerly from Blind Ben's lips, and he began to tremble a bit. "What if Ormal should come?"

"He should not lay a hand on you, my lad!"

"Ab-r-rh!" snarled a savage voice, close at hand. "So you are planning to steal my child, you whelp!"

A scream of terror broke from the boy's lips, and Mr. Bumm leaped to his feet, with Benny in his arms, whirling to confront Brandon, the Gypsy.

"So you have returned, you miserable dog!" said the mendicant, fearlessly.

"Yes, I have returned—just in time. Put down that boy!"

"For what?"

"Because I say so!"

"Who are you?"

"The brat's father."

"You lie like the devil!" asserted Mr. Bumm. "You are no more the father of this child than I am."

"Dare you say that?"

"What is there to be afraid of?"

"Me."

"Swarling curs never yet frightened me."

Brandon was furious. His beady eyes blazed and he fairly frothed at the mouth. With his hands working convulsively, he advanced a step toward the man who still held the child in his arms.

"Stop there!" and Mr. Bumm thrust out one hand, warily. "I have no use for you or any of your kind, you Gypsy dog—you kidnapper of children! Keep your distance, or I will be forced to give you a jolly good licking."

This only increased Ormal's rage.

"Put down that child! put down that child!" he cried.

"Go to blazes, where you belong!" answered the blind lad's champion. "I'll guarantee you will find a hot corner reserved for you."

"I'll cut your heart out!" snarled the Gypsy, and a knife sprang into his hand.

Quick as thought, G. W. Bumm lowered the blind boy to the ground, placing the lad behind him.

"Come on!" he cried, defiantly. "I am not armed, but I am a match for you barehanded!"

"Come here, kid," commanded the Gypsy, speaking to Benny.

"Don't you stir, my boy," said the child's new-found friend. "He shall not touch you."

"You shall be licked within an inch of your life if you do not mind," threatened Ormal.

"You shall not be licked at all," assured Mr. Bumm.

"Are you coming?" snarled the dark-faced man.

"Not to-day," retorted the mendicant.

Brandon hesitated, surveying Bumm from head to feet, evidently "sizing him up."

"I am all here," declared Blind Ben's friend. "It takes a better man than you to get away with me."

"We shall see!"

Then Brandon leaped forward, flourishing the wicked knife. Mr. Bumm did not quail in the least, but he met the Gypsy half-way. Ormal struck at the other's throat, but felt the wrist of his knife hand caught in the grasp of a strong man.

"Here you have it!"

With these words, Bumm struck the Gypsy a terrible blow fairly between the eyes, at the same time releasing the hold on his wrist.

The Gypsy went down like a beef before the blow of the butcher.

CHAPTER XIX.

WILD BESS CHIPS IN.

"Now, Benny," coolly remarked Mr. Bumm, "we will do the grand vanishing act."

With that he caught the child in his arms and struck out through the woods at a run. The man was a wonderfully good runner.

"I've had to leg it a great many times," he observed, as he dashed along. "I am often given a scandalously short time to get out of a town, and I have to lump myself or be presented with a hemp necktie. As I have not worn neckties of any kind for some years, and I have a special aversion for one made of hemp, I rise up and scoot."

He made this explanation as he dashed easily along, the blind lad clinging to his neck. He did not follow a straight course, for he knew the Gypsy would pursue as soon as he recovered from the blow he had received.

"Got to throw him off the track," muttered the fugitive. "We don't want that creature bothering us any more, Benny."

"No, no!" gasped the lad, who was all tremble with terror.

"Now, don't you be frightened, little fellow," advised the man. "I just gave him a rap that sent him flopping over like he had been taken with a weakness of the legs. I'll bet a dollar—that is, I would if I had it—that he has not got the bea out of his bonnet yet. It was a regular John L. socker I gave him."

Bumm doubled and twisted on his way through the timber, but finally came out at a rocky gorge that he knew led to Tar Heel.

"Reckon we had better make for the town, Benny," he said. "I don't seem to know of any other place to go at present. I will find a place to hide you from the old bag and her worthy son."

So he made for the mining-camp.

It was plain that Brandon had not pursued them very hotly, for they saw nothing of him. They had almost reached Tar Heel when they came face to face with a party of desperadoes looking men. Horror Hank and Gentle Jim were with the gang.

"Hello!" cried Hank. "What in the name of sin hev we byer?"

"Bumm an' er babbly!" squeaked Gentle Jim.

"Whar'd be git ther kid?"

"Stole it, to be course," said another of the gang.

"Right you be, Pike," nodded the red-headed bully. "Ther critter stole ther kid. I reckon it's our solumn duty ter take keer of ther young'un."

"Hole on, Hank," protested Gentle Jim.

"We're out arter other game."

"I know; but ef we don't find ther Sharp—"

"We hain't looker fur."

"He kem this yere way?"

"Yep."

"Wal, I'm in fer rakin' arter ther kid. Thar's money in ther youngster."

"How do ye make that out?"

"Look at ther pile he scooped in ther Palace las' night. Jest take him roun' over ther kentry an' he'd make our forchunes."

"Dunno but you're right."

"Sides that, Bumm hain't got no right with him, an' so we must look arter ther kid. Mebbe he's ther child of some rich galoot as 'd come down right smart ter git claws on him onceit more."

That was enough. By this time Gentle Jim was eager to get hold of the boy.

"Say," and the gang of roughs advanced on G. W. Bumm, "we want that kid."

"Well, ye won't git him!" asserted the mendicant, falling into the dialect manner of speaking. "I'm blowed ef you kin lay han's on ther boy, Horror Hank!"

The red-head laughed.

"Heur that!" he shouted.

"Torks like he wuz a man!" scornfully piped Jim.

"You'll find I'm man enough fer your gang," defiantly declared Mr. Bumm, retreating to some bowlders, where he put the blind boy down and picked up some stones. "I'm a tough ole nut ter crowd, an' I'll make some of ye sick afore ye git ther boy, now you 'member that!"

"He hain't armed," cried one of the gang.

"We kin down him easy."

"Come on!"

"Hold on!" shouted the mendicant, threateningly. "I am armed. I kin knock ther most of your gang over with these rocks, fer I'm a dead straight throw. I us'ter be a base-ball crank, an' they called me ther best throw in ther club. Some of you critters 'll git yer heads broke wide open if you crowd George Washington Bumm ter ther wall! You hear me yoop, an' I can't tell a lie."

"I reckon we'll lynch ther critter," observed the red-headed ruffian. "He deserves it anyhow, an' it's ther law, now that he has stole ther blind kid. Jest think of stealin' a blind boy frum his own daddy!"

"That's me," cried a voice, and Brandon the Gypsy appeared. "That wretch stole my little boy—my poor little blind boy!"

"Wal, we'll fix him fer it, shore's ye'r livin'," assured Horror Hank. "We're goin' ter stretch his neck."

"That's right!" came savagely from Ormal's lips. "I want a good chance to pull on the rope!"

"Figgerin' on gittin' even, eh?" cheerfully grinned the bummer, although he knew his situation was desperate. "Well, I do hope you will join in the rush, for I will try to knock you over first of all; but I'll bet a house you keep behind all the rest."

"Don't stop to talk with him!" snarled the Gypsy. "He may find some way to give us the slip."

"That's so," nodded Hank. "Come on an' we'll down him. All ready fer ther rush, pards. Now—"

"Now, you keep right whar ye are, ur you'll chaw lead fast as these guns kin spit it!" cried a ringing voice, and Wild Bess suddenly arose from behind the rocks, a revolver in either hand. "You bet yer sweet life I'm takin' a ban' in this yere circus, an' I reckon I'll be ringmaster. Ther crack o' these pops 'll be a bit louder than ther crack o' er whip, an' their sting 'll mean more. Don't you galoots reckon you'd best go powerful slow?"

"Ther devil!" growled Horror Hank.

"Don't call yerself names," advised the strange girl, as cool as a cucumber. "Besides, ther haln't jest right. You hain't ther devil; you're only Satan's pup."

"Are you going to let that woman stop you?" raved Brandon, starting forward.

Like a flash, Bess turned one of her revolvers on the Gypsy, bringing him to a sudden halt.

"A bullet will stop you ef you don't chain up," asserted the brave girl. "I want you ter understand I kin cut ther buttons off your coat, ever' durned one, quicker than you kin say Holy Moses. More than that, I'll do et ef you git too previous in your manner. Ever' button'll be drivin' clean through your wu'thless body!"

The Gypsy quailed before her flashing eyes, but he was not ready to give in.

"That is my child there, and that ragged dog is stealing it!" he explained. "Are you going to aid him?"

"Not ef you tell ther truth."

"I do."

"I'm not so blessed sure o' that. How is it, Bumm?"

"Ther kid don't berlong ter ther black-faced whelp, Miss Bess. Jest take er look at ther face of it an' you'll see I'm right."

"Don't durst do it now, pard," explained the girl. "Ef I take my peepers off these skunks, they'll jump fer us. Ef I keep them under kiver, I kin down ther most o' em afore they kin git ter us."

"Then we'll leave it ter ther boy ter say who he'll go with. How'll that do?"

"O. K."

"All right: Benny, it's left ter you. Who will ye go with? Shall it be me, or will ye return ter ther Gypsies?"

"I'd rather go with you," answered the boy. "You know I do not want to return to Granny, for she would beat me."

"Thet settles it!" cried Wild Bess. "Bum, ther kid is yours fer ther present."

"This is not right!" stormed Brandon, furiously. "Am I to be robbed of my child in this way?"

"No, no!" cried the gang.

"Oh, come off!" contemptuously exclaimed Bess. "W'n't is ther matter with you galoots? Be you settin' yerselves up as ther bennyfactors o' injured daddys? Thet won't wash! Ever' buddy knows w'at you be, an' it's a plumb wonder ther hull o' ye hain't been hung fer hoss-stealin' long 'fore this!"

"Be we goin' ter let one gal bluff us?" cried Gentle Jim.

"No, no!"

"Ef you think that's any bluff 'bout it, jest you try ter climb fer me," came deliberately from Bess's red lips. "You'll find I mean business with a mighty big B."

"Glory ter ther ram!" laughed G. W. Bumm.

"This is the kind of a gal I do 'dmire! Miss Bess, you're a howler from Blizzard Bar!"

"Oh, I don't usually 'low myself ter be run over by this kind o' er gang," was the girl's quiet remark. "I don't love any o' em, not a little bit."

"I think we kin make 'em tired ef they try us a whirl," declared the mendicant. "You sock ther lead ter 'em, an' I'll pile on ther rocks. It'll be a mighty rocky trail they'll have ter travel."

"Waal, I shud' smell a smoke! We'll make this yere raven drip with red, red gore. Hang'd ef I don't kinder wish they'd try us on!"

"Me too!"

"Say," cried Bess, continuing the bluff, "why don't you skunks come at us! We're jest dyin' fer ye ter make a dive in our direction. Ef I can't blow ther stuffin' out o' Horror Hank an' Gentle Jim fu'st two pops—"

She did not finish.

Up behind Bumm rose a man who struck the mendicant to the ground with a single blow, then leaped on the brave girl, yelling:

"Come on, pards, come on!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE SPARKLER SHARP HOLDS TRUMPS.

One of the gang had crept up behind the little party and taken them at an advantage.

With wild yells of delight, the ruffian crew started to rush toward the rocks.

But they suddenly halted.

Over the bowlders vaulted a man who, with one blow, sent the ruffian who had grasped Wild Bess reeling to the ground. Then, like a flash, he wheeled toward the mob, a brace of revolvers in his grasp.

"Come on, you villainous crew!" he cried, in ringing tones. "Come on and chew lead!"

But they did not seem inclined to accept the invitation.

Instead of that, they came to a sudden halt.

"That's ther stuff!" chimed in Wild Bess, again turning her weapons on the mob. "Walk up an' swaller yer bitters!"

The man whom Basil had knocked over half struggled to his feet and turned toward the defiant persons behind the bowlders, but in a twinkling one of the girl's revolvers covered him.

"Git!" she commanded. "Git! an' consider yerself lucky ye got off with a whole skin. Slide, you sucker, slide!"

The fellow "slid." Plainly he agreed with her and thought himself lucky to get off thus easily.

The tables had been suddenly turned on the gang of desperadoes, and they saw the game slipping through their fingers.

All but Brandon the Gypsy.

"Down with them!" he yelled, and he would have rushed straight upon the little party had not Horror Hank held him back.

"Chain up, ye fool!" growled the big tough.

"You'll git yer everlasting' dost ef ye try it! They'll run ye full o' hoels shore's ye're born!"

"But are we to let them get off now? Are we to let them bluff us?"

"It looks that way," confessed the red-head.

"It can't be!" fumed the Gypsy.

"Reckon you don't know them critters."

"Why?"

"Tell ye w'at, it w'u'dn't make er dern'd bit of difference ter them ef we wus ten ter their one; an', as fer us, they've got ther drap. D'yer tumble?—they've got ther drap!"

"We can overpower them."

"That's whar ye make a fool of yerself," declared Hank, speaking so the Gypsy alone could hear his words. "All ther way thar wuz ter git at 'em wuz ter take 'em by a trick. We tried that, an' failed. Now, they'd wipe us out afore we c'u'd climb them rocks. Ef you're anxious fer death, jest you wade right in an' you'll git all ye want."

It was hard to convince Brandon this was the actual state of affairs, but he saw none of the gang were in for charging on the rocks, and he hardly had the foolhardiness to make the charge alone.

Wild Bess was laughing with delight.

"You chipped in at ther right time, pard," she said, to the sport. "Thet varmint hed crep' roun' an' cotched us foul. I dunno but he'd hed it all his own way 'thout even a shot bein' fired of 'ta'n bin fer you."

"It was fortunate I played my cards just when I did, then. I happened to see that you were in a tight box, so I thought I would take a hand. I barely got round in time."

"But you got thar, pard!" cried Bess, her eyes glowing brightly—"you got thar with both feet!"

"Sir," said George Washington Bumm, who had arisen to his feet and was tenderly rubbing his head, "I am led ter remark that you're a jim-do-dol! You cap ther deck!"

"I never cap the deck when I am playing with honest men," was the smiling retort. "When dealing with ruffians of this stripe, I give them trick for trick."

"One thing is sure," grinned Mr. Bumm. "You hold a good hand, an' revolvers are trumps."

At this moment Horror Hank called:

"I say, thar."

"Well, say it."

"This hain't no fair shake."

"You're a fine fellow to talk about fair shakes!" contemptuously retorted the sport.

"Jest you galoots do w'at's right an' we'll let ye lone," promised the rough.

"Honestly?"

"Honest Injum."

"How good you are!" laughed Basil.

"Too good ter live!" added Bess.

"You deserve a present," the sport asserted.

"Yes, a hemp necktie," agreed the girl.

"Ter blazes with yer bluff!" growled Hank.

"Talk business, will ye?"

"Oh, cert."

"Do you mean ter do w'at's right?"

"Every time."

"Then give up that kid, an' we'll let ye go."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"You don't mean it?"

"I do."

"Do the rest of your pards agree to that?"

"They agrees ter anythin' I say."

"Yes, we agrees ter anythin' Hank says," affirmed Gentle Jim.

"What do you want of the boy?" asked Basil.

"His own daddy hyer wants him."

"So that man claims to be his daddy?"

"Yep."

"Well, he is the biggest liar in seventeen States."

Brandon gave a howl of rage and whipped out a knife.

"Let me get at that man!" he snarled. "I will cut his heart out!"

Hank held him back, but, smiling sweetly, the Sparkler Sharp calmly said:

"Let him come. I will give him a thorough ticket to Glory—or the other place."

"You derned fool!" hissing whispering the red-headed rascal, still clinging to the Gypsy's arm. "Do you want ter git snuffed out sure? Ef ye do, go ahead, an' be derned ter ye!"

He relinquished his grasp, but his words had cooled the Gypsy's ardor.

"Give me my child!" shouted Ormal Brandon, flourishing the knife above his head.

"Go soak yer head!" cried Wild Bess, scornfully. "You hain't built right ter play rats on this yere crowd! We've seen lots o' your kind afore."

"The best thing you can do is climb out of this," declared the Spotter Sport. "We know you for what you are—a miserable child-stealer! You are sure to get hurt if you do not make yourself scarce."

"I've more than haft a mind ter knock ye over jest fer fun," asserted the girl.

"Then you do not mean to give up the boy?"

"Not to-day."

"I will have my revenge on you for this!" fumed the furious Gypsy. "You will be sorry you ever run across the path of Brandon! Gypsies never forget an enemy!"

"It will be the best for you to hold yourself in check, if you do not forget," said Basil; "for it may cost you dear if you try any funny business on this crowd. As for that entire gang, I advise them to make themselves scarce. We

have seen them as long as we want to. Get out!"

"Yes, take a skip!" cried Wild Bess. "This is not a healthy locality for you."

"I low thet's right," whined Gentle Jim. "Fact is, I've got pressin' business elsewhere."

With that, the little fire-eater turned away, and the others followed him, excepting the Gypsy. As for Brandon, he fumed like a mad dog, calling the others cowards and swearing he would attack the sport alone and single-handed.

But he did not. He stood too much in awe of the handsome revolvers in Basil Rodman's hands.

"Trot along with the gang," called Wild Bess. "We hain't got no fur ther use fer you."

"I will go," snarled the furious man; "but this is not the last you will see of Brandon! I will have that child, and all the world shall not prevent! I swear it!"

Then he turned away.

"It would have been strictly proper ef we hed salted that whelp," observed the girl, as they watched the Gypsy depart. "He will make future trouble."

"It is plain he means to do so," agreed the sport. "But he is no more than a cowardly dog, even though he showed what seemed to be bulldog courage. I have had a great deal of dealing with his kind."

"It was lucky you happened around just as you did," said Bess. "They hed us dead ter rights then."

"I have wondered if I would ever have a chance to repay in a measure the score you have against me."

"I hain't got no score ag'in' ye, pard."

"But you have befriended me twice."

"Hol thet wuz northin'."

"You say so, but I know how much it was on the second occasion. It happened to be against this very gang who just sneaked away, but I little thought I should have a chance to aid you in a similar predicament."

"A wuss one, partner," declared the girl. "You hed ther drap w'en I chipped; but they hed us dead foul w'en you tuck a ban."

"But they would not have harmed you."

"I hain't so sure o' thet. Thar don't none o' that measly crew like me over much, fer I hav spiled more nor one job fer 'em. They might hav bin tempted ter git squar'."

"The brutes!"

"Now you hav named 'em!"

"Tar Heel ought to rise and drive the gang out."

"It will, some time."

"As for Brandon, he did not get the child."

"No, and—"

Bess paused in amazement, for she had turned to make a remarkable discovery.

Both Bumm and the blind boy had disappeared!

CHAPTER XXI.

BESS AND BASIL.

"HOLY smoke!" cried Wild Bess. "Whar in ther name o' sin hav they gone ter?"

"This is surprising," confessed the sport.

"The bummer and the child have vanished."

"An' thar's only one way fer them ter hav gone."

"Over these rocks."

"Shore."

"And then—"

"They may hav gone ter town, ur they may hav slid t'other way."

"Let's go over the rocks and see if they are near."

Together they climbed over the ragged rocks, Basil offering his fair companion assistance, which was laughingly declined.

"I'm able ter look out fer Number One, you bet!" the girl declared. "I'm uster climbin' round hyer an' thar whar it's mighty rough; but ef you want a lift, jest call on me."

"You will make a good helpmate fo' some man when you are married, Miss Bess," the sharp smiled.

"W'at, me? Oh, good Lord! me git merried? Partner, you must be jokin'!"

"Nary joke."

"Why, you don't reckon I'll ever git merried, do yer?"

"Certainly I do."

"Wal, I won't!"

The word came out spitefully—almost.

"Why not?" laughingly inquired the sport. "What reasons have you for thinking you will not marry?"

"Reasons enough. S'pose I'm goin' ter be tied down ter any man as w'u'd bev me? Wa-al, I sh'u'd smile! You see hyer, pard: I know jest w'at kind of a gal I be."

Basil was startled, and his face suddenly became grave.

"What kind of a girl you be?" he slowly repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Jest this: I hain't got no eddycashun, an' I know it. I w'u'dn't be fit ter merry a gentleman, fer I'd be below him; an' by gracious! you don't ketch me merryin' anythin' I kin pick up! Thet's ther kind o'er hair-pin I be!"

By this time they had passover the rocks and descended the other side. In vain they looked around for G. W. Bumm and the blind child. Neither man nor boy was to be seen.

"They are not here," said Basil. "It is plain Bumm has made himself scarce and taken the child with him."

"W'at made him do that?"

"Perhaps he fancied we would be overpowered by the gang, and so he was bound to get away."

Bess shook her head.

"I don't reckon it wus thet. Ef he'd tried ter climb over ther rocks w'en ther gang wuz thar, they'd seen him: n' guv ther larm."

"Then yon think—"

"He waited tell they wuz gone afore he skipped."

"You may be right, but he must have moved lively then. Besides that, I cannot understand why he should wish to sneak away from his friends."

"He may hav thought we'd hav ther kid taken erway frum him."

Basil nodded.

"I fancy you have struck the truth of the case, Miss Bess. The man knew he was not suited to take charge of the child, and he feared he would lose it. That caused him to get over the rocks as lively as he could."

"An' he will lay low fer a time."

"Probably he will— Which way do you walk—toward the town?"

"Yep."

"I am going that way. If you do not object, we will walk along together."

"I hain't objectin' ter men of yer caliber," said Bess, soberly, her dark eyes falling before the inquiring gaze he quickly turned upon her. "It's ther leetle whippet-snappets that makes me kick—an' I kin kick like a steer, pard."

The sharp was greatly interested in the strange girl. For some reason he liked her more than he could tell. There was a frankness and honesty about her that was simply charming, for all of the strange mixture of Western dialect and city slang which she indulged in. Somehow the slang did not seem so rough and coarse when it fell from her red lips, and she used those expressions in a plain, matter-of-fact way, as if they came without a thought.

"We were speaking of getting married," observed Basil, as they turned their faces toward Tar Heel.

Bess looked startled.

"W'at, you an' me?" she cried.

"Yes."

"You an' me git married?"

Then he understood her, and he lifted one hand to his mustache to conceal a smile, as he retorted:

"You and I were talking of your getting married, you know."

A strange look flashed over her face, and he saw she lost some color.

"Oh, yep, I 'member, now," she said, carelessly.

"I do not know as I fully understood you."

"Why?"

"Well, you gave the impression that you could not find a man good enough for you."

"Oh, I didn't mean thet! W'at I did mean wuz thet I c'u'd not find a man thet I'd hav who'd hav me."

"Ah!"

"Yep. Ye see, I w'u'dn't merry anythin' I c'u'd git, an' I hain't got ther eddycashun ter merry anythin' I might want. Sabe?"

"Now I do. I think you underestimate your own value."

"No; but I know jest how ignerent I be. I don't know northin' skeercely, 'cept 'bout ther mountains an' ther gorges. Ther sky an' ther big hills hav bin ther only books I ever studied. Now w'at kind o' a man w'u'd want to take me inter his ranch ter live as his wife? Nobody but some galoot as didn't know no more'n w'at I do. Waal, I hain't dead stuck on thet thar kind. Thet's w'at's ther matter with me!"

"I see; you want to be a lady."

I w'u'dn't keer a durn whether he hed a million dollars ur not a holy red cent ter his name!"

Basil Rodman felt a thrill run over him. He could not understand this girl, but something told him she had a noble heart within her bosom. Her words touched him, and he halted, putting out a hand that rested on Bessie's arm. She paused and faced him.

"Miss Bess," and he was very sober, "your words show me you are a noble, true-hearted girl. I am proud to know you, and I will always be your friend."

Her eyes glowed with delight, and she held out her hand, crying:

"Putt'er thar, pard!"

Then they shook hands, warmly.

"I don't reckon I'll go any further this yere way," said the girl. "We're in sight o' ther camp, but I'll stop hyer fer a bit."

Basil would have stopped with her, but she made an excuse that only left him the privilege of going on, so he bade her good-by, lifting his hat in a gallant manner.

Wild Bess stood and watched him as he strode lightly away.

There was a very sober look on her pretty face and a strange light in her eyes—a sad light.

"Thar is a man I might love!" she muttered, softly. "He is handsome, brave an' noble—an' he's a gentleman! I feel that I am gittin' ter think too much o' him—more than I oughter. He kin never be northin' ter me, an' I must not git cracked over him. Ef I do, it'll be ther wuss fer me."

"W'at a dashin' feller he is! He don't keer fer northin'! An' his eyes—I never saw eyes that c'u'd look clean down inter my heart ther way them brown ones o' his do. By Jove! I reckon I'm mighty nigh clean gone on him! I feel as if I'd do anythin' fer him! W'y, I'd face a hundred deaths at his si le!"

And she spoke the truth. Unconsciously, the girl had become quite infatuated with the Sparkler Sharp.

"But he w'u'dn't keer fer me!" she said, sadly. "He is eddycated an' polished, an' I'd be no good fer sech as he. I hain't fit fer him, an' I know it! I might jest as well take things cool an' let 'em slide, though it does make an awful tearin' up in my heart."

"Hello! Thar's ther widder! She's takin' a ride, as she does ever' day 'bout this time. She's meetin' him now. W'at! Holy smoke! He's liftin' his hat ter her an' bowin'! An' she returns ther bow! Great Scott! Do they know each other? I don't seem ter understand that! Kin it be—No, not he didn't come ter Tar Heel ter see her!"

The girl's face was flushed and her bosom heaving. She seemed greatly excited.

The Woman in Black came on, after recognizing Basil, and Wild Bess drew back to one side of the trail. Still watching, she saw the sport turn and look after the widow. The act caused a low moan to break from her lips.

Bess took good care to be well out of the trail when the widow passed, but her flashing eyes followed every motion of the graceful woman on the horse. The widow saw the girl, and something like a look of disdain passed over her face, then she passed on, without turning another glance toward Bess.

"Go, go!" cried the girl, her breath coming in short pants. "I have never liked you, and now I believe I hate you! You know him, but you are treacherous an' bad! I kin read it in yer face! You are no good, an' I hope ye don't ketch ther sport."

She was so excited that she did not see a sad-faced little woman who approached from behind some boulders near at hand. The little woman hesitated and seemed in doubt, then she came quickly forward and touched the girl's arm.

"I beg your pardon," she said, as Bess wheeled quickly on her. "But that gentleman you were with—who is he?—who is he?"

CHAPTER XXII.

A SLEEK RASCAL AND A WEAK WOMAN.

WILD BESS was startled, for the woman's manner was wild and she was all atremble with excitement.

"Him?" exclaimed Bess. "W'y, that wuz ther Sparkler Sharp. He's a daisy with ther keerd, I tell you!"

"But his name—what is his name?" panted the woman.

"His name? Lemme see; I hev heerd it. It is—it is—"

"What? Oh, do not keep me in suspense! If you knew the torture of the suspense! He looks like one who died years and years ago! His face is the same—his manner the same! And still it cannot be! He is dead, dead!"

The woman's hands were clasped and her blue eyes full of tears. She had been handsome once—Bess saw that. She was still more than good looking, but there was a gloomy sadness on her face.

Once more she caught Bess by the arm.

"Who is he?" she demanded, almost fiercely. "Tell me the truth! Don't lie to me!"

"I wouldn't lie ter ye—"

"I don't know—I don't know! So many have

lied to me, I know not whom to trust. But you have not told me his name."

"It is Basil Rodman."

A great look of disappointment settled on the little woman's face.

"Oh, God!" she cried, lifting her hands. "I knew it could not be Mark, and yet the truth has filled me with despair. He was so like him—so like him! Tall, manly, handsome! At first I thought I saw a spirit, and then—and then I fancied it might really be Mark. Fool, fool—I was a fool! Poor boy! he has been in his grave these long, long years!"

Bess tried to soothe the woman, for the poor creature grew wilder with every word she uttered. She took the girl's hand in both of hers and clung to it.

"You are a good girl—a good girl!" she declared. "I can see it in your eyes. You know very little of sorrow now, but you can never tell what the future may hold in store for you. We can promise ourselves no happiness for tomorrow, even though everything is bright and sunny to-day."

"Who was this man you speak of?" asked Bess. "Was he your lover? You say he is dead?"

"Yes, yes; dead these many years!"

"An' you never merried him? Too bad, too bad! Au' he looked like Basil Rodman? Then he must hev been a handsome and noble fellow."

Bess rattled on for some minutes, not pausing to give the blue-eyed little woman a chance to speak. She finished with:

"I think I know ye. You are the strange woman that lives in the little cottage out on the Blue Mountain side. The mayor owns ther shebang. Are you ther woman?"

The answer was a nod.

"I knowed it," declared the girl, with satisfaction. "But who in time be you? Thar don't nobody but ther mayor seem ter know anythin' 'bout ye, an' he won't tell w'at he knows."

"I am a woman with a sorrow," was the reply. "In my heart I carry a constant pain."

"I am sorry fer ye."

"I know you are, for I can see it in your eyes—your honest eyes. Your sympathy is sweet, for I have found very little sympathy in this big, cruel world."

"Ef she only knowned w'at ther people o' Tar Heel said 'bout her," thought Bess. "Oh, Lordy! that w'u'd crush her! They think she hain't enny better than she oughter be, jest 'cause she lives in a cabin owned by the mayor. I reckon she's straight as a string, else I don't know northin' w'en I see it."

"You hadn't oughter live thar all erlone," said the girl aloud. "Ennyhow, you oughter hev somebody come an' see ye sometimes."

"Who'd come?"

"I would, you bet!"

"Then I shall be glad to see you. You must not mind if I act a little strange. It is a wonder I am not mad. Sometimes," and her voice sunk to a whisper, "I think I am mad! I feel so strange—my head is light. When I saw him with you I nearly fainted. I think I did lose consciousness for an instant, for when I looked again, he was gone and you were standing here alone. Then I came down."

"But I saw another!" she went on, wildly. "The woman who passed. It was only a glimpse of her face, but that was enough! Oh, I knew she was here! I did not fancy her a spirit! No, no, no! She was false—false and cruel! But I must not talk of it! It makes such a pain in my heart and it makes my head feel so bad!"

"Pore woman!" came softly from Wild Bess's lips. "Your fortune must have been hard ter make ye like this!"

The woman put her hands to her head.

"I'm going back," she said huskily—"I'm going back to the cottage. "I cannot stay here, for I am afraid my strength will desert me."

"Can't I go a piece with yer?"

"A little way."

Bess gave the other her arm, and they walked toward the town. The girl did her best to divert the woman's mind from the thoughts which troubled her so. They skirted the edge of the place, but before they came in sight of the strange woman's cabin home, she paused and said:

"This is far enough now. I thank you for coming thus far with me. Your kindness I shall not forget. At some other time, I trust you will come and see me. Rap four times on the door, and I shall know it is you. Good-by."

They parted, and Bess watched her till she nearly disappeared.

"Poor critter!" murmured the girl. "She is good—I c'u'd see it in her eyes. She little knows w'at some o' ther town says erbout her."

Meanwhile, the strange woman continued on toward the cabin where she made her home. There was a dull pain in her heart and tears in her eyes. She paid little heed to anything around her, and so did not see the man who stealthily followed.

That man was the one who visited the Gypsy camp earlier in the day—Mr. Malcome.

"Ha! ha!" savagely laughed the portly rascal. "So you have been out for a walk, Rena! You

fancy you are following me from place to place—is that it? I swear, I don't know! It looks that way, and yet you do not seem to fancy me. I have kept track of you for years, and, although you have faded somewhat, you are still all the woman in the world for me!"

Straight to the cabin he followed the woman. She opened the door and entered, and, before she could close it, he slipped into the doorway.

"Good-day, Rena," he said.

Sue uttered a cry and fell back, her face turning pale.

"You here!"

"I am."

"Then go!" and she motioned him away, a look of loathing on her face—"go, you monster!"

"You are not complimentary, my dear, he declared, as he stepped into the cabin and closed the door.

In terror, she started to rush out, but he placed his back against the door and smiled in diabolical fashion.

"Do not be in a hurry, Rena Lenoir. You see I honor you with that name."

"And I have a right to it!" she cried, her blue eyes getting brilliant with the indignation that throbbed in her veins. "It is my true name before God and man!"

"You still cling to that belief?"

"I know it!"

"Beyond a doubt?"

"Yes, beyond a doubt! Your vile lies have not changed me! I know you for what you are, Aubry Kent!"

"And I am your best friend, Rena."

"My best friend!" with bitterness. "You come here and say that to me—you, you! You are a wretch too miserable to breathe God's pure air!"

He clapped his hands.

"Bravo, bravo!" he cried. "You are really beautiful. I had fancied you crushed—I had thought your spirit broken; but you seem to have all the spirit of old. By Jove! you look better to-day than you did nine years ago!"

"I have heard enough of this! Let me pass!"

"Where would you go?"

"No matter. I will go anywhere to be rid of your hated presence!"

"Well, I'm not going to let you pass. I have come to have a social little talk with you, and I am not going to leave till I get ready. Neither will you leave."

"I will scream for help!"

"Scream and be hanged! Ten chances to one, nobody will hear you. If they do—well, I will place you in such a compromising position that the people of Tar Heel will look on you with scorn and derision. You see I hold the best hand, Rena."

"You heartless wretch!" she gasped, sinking into a chair.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MALCOME SHOWS HIS EVIL NATURE.

THE man langbed with evil satisfaction.

"So you are coming to your senses!" he said.

"Well, I thought you would."

She rested her elbows on a little table and buried her face in her hands making no reply, her whole frame quivering with emotion. There was a gloating look on his smooth face as he watched her, and he nodded to himself in a complacent manner.

For some moments the woman remained thus, plainly struggling to regain control of herself, and the sleek rascal did not venture to speak till she looked up. Then he began:

"My dear—"

Like a flash she was on her feet, her blue eyes blazing.

"Stop!" she cried. "I will not stand that!"

"Is—that—so!" he drawled, but the words were not a question. "I don't see how you are going to help it—really I don't."

"You shall learn if you continue to persecute me!"

"Persecute! Oh, come, come—"

"That is what I said, and that is what I meant. Are you not satisfied with the ruin you have wrought? I know it was your evil and lying tongue that sent two men to their deaths!"

"Now you are piling it on too steep, Rena!"

"Cowardly wretch!"

"For every word of that kind that passes your lips, you shall repay me with a loving one."

She made a gesture of loathing.

"Love you! I would sooner love the serpent that crawls in the grass!"

"You would have made your fortune on the stage, my dear—"

"That again!" Then she turned away in despair, lifting her clasped hands.

"Oh, God!" she cried; "is there no escape from this wretch? Is death my only refuge?"

A determined look settled on his face.

"Don't talk of death. You have a long life before you, and I mean to make it a happy life."

Once again her eyes flashed scorn upon him, but he did not quail before the look.

"I am ready and willing to marry you—"

She came at him with a rush, and had he not

grasped her hand, she would have struck him in the face.

"Why, you little tiger-cat!" he exclaimed, in amazement. "Do you know what you are doing?"

She tore her hand from his fingers, reeling backward.

"No, no, no!" she moaned. "I feel as if I were going mad! I must be mad, else I would not have done such a thing! I was driven wild by your words, man—your hateful words! Do you want to turn my brain—would you kill me? Then thrust a knife into my heart, but for God's sake do not torture me to death in this awful manner! I cannot stand it! You will drive me to take my own life!"

She sprung to the little table and wrenched out a drawer. In another instant a small revolver was in her grasp.

"I have kept it for the moment when I could endure life no longer!" she wildly shrieked. "That time has come, but as there is a Heaven above, you die first! You caused the death of two noble men, and now I will have vengeance! For that I condemn my soul to perdition! You came here to carry on your torture, but you came to your death! Now you—Ah!"

Crack!

The revolver spoke as he leaped forward. He had realized she really meant to kill him, and he was prepared for the shot. Her hand was thrust upward as the weapon spoke.

"Mad woman!"

Then he tore the weapon from her hand and caught her sinking figure in his arms.

"She has fainted!" he cried.

He bore her to a small couch in the room, and when she recovered, she found him bathing her face and hands.

That was enough.

Weak, though she was, she struggled up. He tried to press her back, telling her she must not arise, but she hoarsely gasped:

"Away!"

Once her head swam and things grew dark all around, causing her to partially sink back. As through a mist, she saw him start toward her, and that banished the spell.

"Back!"

Her hand was extended, repulsing him. He halted and looked at her in amazement.

"You shall not touch me again!" declared the brave little woman. "Oh, man, man! have you no heart?—are you utterly cruel and vile? Why will you drive me to such things?"

"I did not dream you would become unbalanced," he answered. "And to try to shoot me! Why—"

"Where is the revolver?"

"Safe in my pocket."

"Give it up!"

"Oh, no! You shall not have temptation constantly before you! There is a bullet somewhere in the ceiling that you intended for my heart. I am not going to give you an opportunity to try your luck again. You might be more successful."

"No, no! I was driven wild. I will not do so again, unless—unless—"

"You see you might, after all; so I will retain the weapon. Such a dangerous thing was never meant for hands like yours."

She had arisen to her feet and stood before him.

"I suppose it is useless to ask you to go," she said. "So I will demand why you have come here."

"Was there not attraction enough—your own sweet self, Rena? You know I loved you in those old days, and now I will tell you again that I love you still. Time has made some changes in you, but you are still the same dear girl."

"And you are still the same sensual wretch—the same crafty and scheming villain! I hold nothing in my heart but scorn and contempt for you! You would have married me in the old days, but it was my wealth for which you schemed. You cared nothing for me, but money was your god!"

"You do not do me justice, little one," he protested. "I will confess that originally I sought to win you for your wealth, but—"

"I have none now. All has been spent and swept away. Only a few thousand—three or four—remain. Such an insignificant sum can be nothing to you now."

"You did not wait to bear me out. I no longer care for your money; if you had not a cent in all the world it would make no difference to me. While I was trying to win you for your wealth I learned to love you."

She made a gesture of appeal, but he went on firmly:

"I swore I would win you for all of my rival. Had you been penniless then, I should not have changed. It was you—and you alone—I cared for. I had a rival, and he won you. I cursed him, and I still swore you should be mine. I was not to be defeated thus."

"And then you set about your work of ruin!"

"Then I hunted up his record. You know what I discovered."

"I know what you claimed to have discovered, but you lied, Aubry Kent, you lied!"

"I did not. I found your marriage was a mockery—it was false—"

"Again you lie!"

"Your tongue says that, but in your heart you know better. You know I tell the truth."

She clung to the chair for support, but in no other way did she show weakness. Her face was stern and hard-set; her eyes met his.

"I know nothing of the kind."

"Still you have never been able to prove anything else. If the marriage had been all right—"

"You know it was a secret marriage."

"I know he deceived you into believing it was a secret marriage, but it was no marriage at all. Had it been, you would have been able to obtain some proof of it. You lived with him as his wife, but you were no more his wife than than you were on the day when you first met him."

Her face was pale as death, and her slender hands clutched the chair convulsively. Every word he uttered went straight to her heart, for she feared he told the truth. Still she would not acknowledge her doubts—never!"

"Why do you go all over this?" she demanded, steadyng her voice as well as she could. "It is known to both of us, only we do not agree on that one point. I still claim I was Lewis Lenoir's lawful wife. And it was you who brought all the sorrow, ruin and death about! You were the serpent that crept into Eden!"

He smiled—what a smile that was!

"You see fit to call me that, but I know your heart is full of doubts. I did nothing but place the proof before your brother. He did the rest."

"That shows what a cowardly wretch you were! You did not dare face Lewis, but you brought all the trouble about through others. The blood of both is on your head! You are a double murderer!"

"What is it to me that your brother tried to kill the man who had deceived you? He did exactly right. Remember, I had sworn to possess you. With your false husband dead, there was a chance for me."

"No, there was none. Had you been the last man in all the world there would have been no chance for you!"

"You do not look at this in the right light. Who befriended you in your time of need? Who was the only one who stood by you when all others pointed the finger of scorn? Woman, even though they considered you ruined, I was ready to make you my wife! I was ready to do anything for you! You do not understand how much of a sacrifice that would have been!"

"And you taunt me with that! Bah! You must think me a weak thing to accept such love as you offer—and accept it after you have flung what you choose to call my disgrace—flung it into my face!"

"I am only trying to convince you how much I love you."

"You can convince me of nothing like that, for I know what your love means! It is pollution! You are corrupt to the heart! Your very presence is contamination!"

"Have a care, woman!" came fiercely from his lips. "You may drive me too far!"

"And now you threaten!"

"Only when you force me to. You seem to forget I even favored you. You seem to forget those days when you were about to become a mother! I protected you then—I enabled you to keep your secret."

"I knew not how vile you were. It was after that I learned you brought all my wretchedness about."

"That is not all you forget, Rena. Your child was born—"

"My baby girl—little Eva!"

"Then I came to your aid again."

"You robbed me of my child!"

"With your consent."

"Had I known, I never would have consented."

"Be that as it may, I took the baby girl and placed it in good hands—"

"Where it died!"

"Through no fault of those who cared for it. The child was always sickly."

"No wonder! Poor thing!"

"And after all this I have done for you, you revile me to-day—you call me a wretch! I would have married you, even though I knew all your secret. Would that have been no sacrifice on my part? I moved in good society in those days."

"Heaven only knows how you ever obtained such a standing!"

He fairly ground his teeth.

"All these years I have waited—and I am waiting still. I swore you should be mine! I am a man who never breaks an oath! If the world stands and we both live, the day will come when you will call me husband!"

"Never!"

"You say that now, but you do not know. You cannot read the future."

"I would to God I could!"

"When I have kept my oath I shall be content. That, and that alone, will satisfy me."

"The day will never come!"

"We shall see."

"Yes, we shall see, Aubry Kent. I will die before I will ever be more to you than I am at this minute! You cannot turn such hatred as mine to love!"

"I do not ask you to love me; I only ask you marry me."

"And you know my answer."

"I know what you now consider your answer, but there are other days coming. The time will come when you will need a protector once more."

"Then death shall protect me from you. In the arms of the grim monster, I will be forever beyond your reach!"

"You are excited now; when I am gone, you will get all over this. Think the matter over, and you will see I have always been your friend. I am far from being the enemy you imagine. I would do anything for you!"

"That talk sounds all right, but I know you all too well, Aubry Kent."

"Well, I will leave you to think it over."

"Thank Heaven!"

"You are glad to get rid of me?"

"Yes."

He scowled.

"It is all right now; but there is another day coming. You will see me again."

"I trust not—never!"

"Well, as you are excited and unreasonable, I will go. I leave you in the care of your new-found friend, Owen Sedgewick."

She did not miss the insinuating sneer in his voice, and with her hands clinched and her white teeth gleaming, she started forward, hissing:

"Devil!"

"Oh, it is all right!" he smiled, waving a hand. "Of course I know about these things. A lone woman must have some kind of male protection, but it is strange you should choose such as the Mayor of Tar Heel in preference to me."

"You had added another insult to your base flings! Well, what could I expect of you? There is the door!"

Still full of spirit, she pointed toward the exit from the cabin.

"I see it, thank you."

He turned away, but at the door he paused to say:

"Don't forget, Rena, I am still your best friend. You do not understand me, but some day I trust you will. You will not need to ask my pardon, for I shall ever be ready to receive you with open arms."

"Go!"

Once more he bowed.

"I am going. Good-day. Think over all I have said, and see if you do not come to your senses. I am as good a man as this Sedgewick, although he happens to be the Grand Mogul of a wretched little mining-camp called Tar Heel."

Then he opened the door, tossed a kiss in her direction and went out.

Flinging up her hands, with a despairing moan, she sank into a chair, resting her arms on the table and burying her face on them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MAYOR MAKES AN ASSERTION.

ALMOST at the very door of the cabin, the departing man met the Mayor of Tar Heel.

Sedgewick paused and surveyed Malcome with anything but a pleasant look on his face.

Malcome was not to be outdone. Pausing, he thrust his hands into his pockets and returned the mayor's stare with a look of insolent inquiry.

In that manner the two men stood eying each other for at least a minute.

"Confound his eyes!" growled Sedgewick.

"An impudent dog!" muttered Malcome.

Quick as thought, the mayor took a step toward the portly rascal, his hands clinched and his eyes glowing.

"Do you mean me, sir?" he demanded.

Again Malcome stared at the mayor, eying him from head to feet.

"I won't have any trouble with the creature," he said, as if speaking to himself, and turned away.

Owen Sedgewick started after the insolent rascal, but checked himself.

"I'll let him go now, but call him to an account later," he said. "I think I will have to shoot him."

He watched Malcome till the fleshy rascal disappeared down the street, then he turned and rapped on the cabin-door.

There was no response.

"I don't like this!" muttered the man at the door. "There seems to be something wrong. He came out of here. What can she have to do with him? I am sure she is inside, yet she does not answer my knock. I will try it again."

He did so, but still there was no answer. Sedgewick shook his head soberly.

"If he has injured her, I will shoot him within the hour!" said the mayor.

Then he tried the door. It was usually fastened, but now it opened before his touch. He entered.

"Mrs. Lenoir—"

He paused, staring in amazement and horror at the figure that uprose before him. It was

Rena, but her face was so wild and ghastly that he scarcely knew her. She glared at him in apprehension.

"My God!" he exclaimed, starting toward her. "What—what is the matter?"

With a little gasp of relief, she sunk down in the chair.

"I thought—he had returned," she spoke, with difficulty.

Then he understood her looks, but what was there between the portly man who had just left the cabin and this woman who remained behind? That was the question which flashed through his head.

Her strength seemed to utterly desert her, but she did not faint. The chair and the table supported her, and her blue eyes were turned on him appealingly. He came and stood before her.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Lenoir?" he asked.

"Nothing," she whispered, "nothing at all. I shall be all right in a moment. Wait; I want to talk with you."

So he waited.

In a short time she had so recovered that she sat up.

"I am so glad you came!" and her voice trembled. "You are my only friend on whom I can depend for protection from that base wretch."

"Who is he? I met him at the door."

"You know I told you all about the man who ruined my life—who separated me from my husband."

He bowed.

"That was the man."

"The devil!"

"Yes, he is a devil," she declared, before the mayor could apologize for his utterance.

"What brought him here?"

"The sight of me. He has found me again."

"Well, I will go right out and shoot him!" firmly said the Mayor of Tar Heel. "That will be the easiest way to dispose of his case."

"No, no!" she exclaimed, appealingly. "You must not do that!"

"Why not?"

"I cannot have you shed blood on my account!"

"Nonsense! I have not shot a man for a week. The people of Tar Heel will think I am getting useless and depose me from office. It is necessary for me to keep up my reputation, and this is a fine opportunity to do so. The infernal dog insulted me at the door, and it will be an easy thing to rake up a row with him. I will run a tunnel in his corpulent system, and he will not bother you any more."

Again she cried:

"No, no!"

"Mrs. Lenoir, I have the highest respect for you, but really you have no right to rob Tar Heel of the pleasure of a funeral. The town has been bankering for a funeral for several days, and now is the time for them to have it."

"I shall never forgive myself if you do this thing! His blood must not be on your hands! If the worst comes, I will kill him!"

"Great Scott!"

Sedgewick was astonished.

"You!" he cried, staring at her. "You don't mean it?"

"I do," was the firm response. "It is right that I should avenge the deaths of my husband and my brother! It is my place to wreak vengeance on the wretch!"

"You're a woman!"

"Had he not wrested my revolver from my hand, he would have been lying dead where you are now standing! I was too slow, and so he saved his worthless life!"

"You tried to kill him?"

"I did."

Again he surveyed her in amazement.

"I can not understand the change that has come over you," was his assertion. "Why, I believed you a weak and persecuted woman, whose spirit was utterly crushed."

"And so I was."

"But now—"

"Now I am changed. An hour has wrought the change. He came here and taunted me—"

"The dastard!"

"That was what wrought the change. I am not the same woman you knew yesterday."

"I believe it. Your eyes glow with a fire that is startling to see, and your whole manner is changed."

"I have decided to avenge my wrongs!"

She had risen to her feet and stood before him. At that moment he thought her the handsomest woman he had ever seen. The color had come back to her face, and there was life and fire in her eyes and her manner. But there was something awe-inspiring about it all—something that sent a cold shiver over him.

"You do not understand me now? Well, you shall understand later. The hunted will turn hunter! I have been bounded long enough!"

"I see you mean to kill the villain."

"Yes, as surely as God spares my life and gives me strength! I wonder I have not made such a resolve before. Now, it seems I have been very weak—very weak. All that has vanished. I know am strong and determined. Nothing shall alter my purpose!"

"Well, now I have got to shoot the fat whelp!" thought the Mayor of Tar Heel. "It is the only way to keep her from doing the job, and that is the kind of work women were never cut out for."

"I wish to purchase one of your revolvers."

The words came from her lips. He knew not what response to make, but he suddenly thought why he had called. He would tell her, and that would divert her thoughts from vengeance for a time at least, so he said:

"Mrs. Lenoir, your brother is still living?"

She fell back and clutched at the table.

"Still living?" she gasped.

"Yes," asserted Owen Sedgewick; "not only living, but in Tar Heel City!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PROSPECTS OF A FUNERAL.

Her face became ashen gray, and her whole form shook like a reed in the wind. She tried to speak, but the words would not come. Then, with a low moan, she sank down into the chair, her strength deserting her once more.

The man pitied her, and he inwardly railed at himself for his abruptness.

"I beg of you—"

He proceeded no further. The look she turned on him silenced him there. She seemed to recover rapidly, for she said, speaking with deliberation:

"I trust you will not jest with me, Mr. Sedgewick."

"I am not jesting," he declared. "Never before in all my life was I more in earnest."

"But it is impossible!"

"You think so, but I have seen him with my own eyes—and I should know him well," he mentally added.

"But he was killed."

"You thought so."

"There is no doubt about it."

"Still, I am sure Mark Eudane is in this town."

"Ah!" and she pressed her hand to her head. "I remember now. I have seen the man who looks like my dead brother, but it is not he."

"What makes you think so?"

"This man bears another name."

"That is common in the wild West."

"My brother was no criminal, so there is no reason why he should change his name."

"You look at it that way—he might look at it differently."

Still she shook her head.

"It is simply impossible. I looked on my brother's face as he lay in the coffin. I saw that coffin lowered into the grave. No, no; the dead do not return to life!"

Owen Sedgewick was puzzled, and he scowled, but said nothing. Could it be possible there were two men so much alike? After asking himself the question, he was forced to acknowledge the man he had seen in Tar Heel had changed from the Mark Eudane he once knew.

"I was startled by the resemblance when I saw him," the woman admitted; "but as soon as I considered it, I saw my folly. There is no reason why Mark, if it were possible he still lived, should not reveal the fact to me. Oh, no! it is utter folly!"

The mayor did not insist, for he saw he could not convince her. In his own mind he was forced to acknowledge he had possibly made a mistake.

"You have been very kind to me, Mr. Wic—Mr. Sedgewick," said Rena. "I shall not forget it. But for you, I would not have been able to keep myself so much in seclusion in this place. And people are so very inquisitive—"

"Not in the West."

"No?"

"No. They don't find it healthy to poke their noses into other people's business. There are any amount of people in the wild and woolly West whose records would not bear investigating. Those folks are touchy, to say the least, and they have a very unpleasant way of shooting at the slightest symptom of inquiry concerning their past or the part of anybody else. Oh, this is an excellent country in the respect of every one minding their own business!"

"Well, you have my thanks just the same, and I think I shall have to leave this cabin."

"What?"

Sedgewick was astonished again.

"Autry Kent said enough to show me what people might think. He insinuated that all was not as it should be between you and me."

The Mayor of Tar Heel came near having a fit.

"Thunder!" he gasped, chokingly. "Now I will have to shoot him!"

The woman saw she had made a mistake in telling him that.

You must not. Leave him to me!"

"So help me Bob, I will blow that dastardly dog full of holes the next time we meet!" he cried, smiting his hands together. "Now, don't you say a word, Mrs. Lenoir! Insinuated that, did he? Well, blast his mouth!"

Sedgewick was thoroughly aroused; he strode up and down the room like a caged lion, and there was something fearful in the look of fury

on his face. He dashed his bat to the floor and ran his fingers through his white hair, while the woman looked on, unable to check his fury.

"The town shall have the funeral!" he asserted. "It is not every time I have so good a cause for shooting a man! I wish I had bored the dog when we met outside!"

He picked up his hat, replaced it on his head, then examined his weapons. Rena arose and placed a hand on his arm.

"I am sorry I told you!" she said.

"You did just right; but you must not think of leaving this cabin. Be sure the people of Tar Heel will not talk about my friends, even though this dog has dared insinuate all was not right. Did he take your revolver?"

"Yes."

"Well, you need something with which to protect yourself, so take this. It is some different from the toy you owned before, and it will kill a man a great deal quicker. No, I will take no money for it. I only loan it to you, and you may return it some time."

She tried to purchase it, but he steadily refused to sell, so she was obliged to accept the weapon as a loan.

"It is self-acting," he explained. "All you have to do is pull the trigger, and that will discharge the weapon. If one of those bullets strikes a man anywhere around where he lives, he is going to act tired and lay down right away. I have two more like these, and I shall buckle on my arsenal when I go out to look for our portly friend Kent."

Once more she entreated him to give up the idea of having trouble with her persecutor.

"There will not be much trouble," he said. "I shall give him a good square show, as I do every man, and then I shall use him for a target. If he is a good shot and quick enough, he may have the satisfaction of avenging himself by perforating me."

"There, there! I ought not to talk like this before you, but I am so stirred up that I scarcely know what I am saying. All the same, you bet I will be cool enough when the time comes for the fun to begin!

"And now, little woman, remember I believe your brother still lives. He did me a good turn once, and I have not forgotten that. If he is here in Tar Heel—Well, we will wait and see how it will come out.

"Now, good-day."

Before she could say anything more he was gone.

Outside the cabin Owen Sedgewick walked away with a swinging stride, a look of determination on his face.

"Business is business," he muttered, "and I have a little on my hands."

"She does not believe Mark is alive, but I have not a doubt. Ha! ha! How well I know he is! He is the hardest man to kill I ever saw! He is the only man I fear now, and I do fear him, for has he not turned detective? He knows my past, and he may consider it his duty to pull me. Well, we will see about that!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

WILD BESS IS AROUND.

It happened that Basil Rodman saw the Mayor of Tar Heel leave the cabin.

"What can have brought him there?" muttered the sport, his face taking a dark look. "I do not like that man, and I fancy I have known him in the past. What business can he have with her?"

He watched Owen Sedgewick go down the street with a swinging stride.

"He is mayor of the place and acts as if he owned the town," said Basil, aloud. "If this woman is truly Rena, what can this man be to her?"

He was perplexed, and studied over the matter for some time, but no light came to his mind.

"How I would love to see her!" he murmured, as he gazed longingly toward the little cabin; "but something keeps me away. Something tells me I have done her a great and irreparable injury. Just what it was I cannot remember now, though it almost comes to me at times. I knew once—I am sure I knew. Perhaps—yes, it must be—that drove me to become the wanderer on the face of the earth that I now am."

"Well, she must not see me. I will keep myself from sight and I will leave Tar Heel soon. I know not exactly what brought me to this place. It is certain my man is not here, and so what keeps me here? There is no work for the Spotter in this camp, still he lingers. Ah! it is not strange! Doris—my Doris is here! I have seen her!"

"But she can be nothing to me—no, no, no! I know her for what she is! She stole away my heart—she secured my best love—then she flung it aside for wealth! She was cruel—she was treacherous! But at times it seems that I love her still."

"And yet—and yet another pair of eyes have found a way to stir my blood—dark eyes! beautiful eyes! And their owner is a mere girl. But she is beautiful, brave and true! I know she has a true heart, no matter what she may seem. She has stood by me in a most remarkable manner, and I—I—"

He did not complete the sentence aloud, but fell to musing for a bit, then suddenly started down the street.

"Night is at hand," he said. "I will return to the hotel. To-morrow I will call on Doris."

Back to the hotel he went, keeping a sharp watch for the mayor, but seeing nothing of him. He found Jerry Jiggers sitting on the veranda in front of the hotel, enjoying a cigar and apparently taking life very easy.

The Man of Schemes hailed Basil as he came up.

"You are the very man I was thinking of," he declared. "Take a seat here by my side, dear sir."

Basil felt inclined to humor the fellow, so he sat down.

"This is a delightful evening, sir," asserted Mr. Jiggers, rubbing his hands together briskly. "It is an evening to set one's imagination astir. See, the shadows are gathering blackly down there in the canyon, even while the last rays of the sun are flooding yonder peak of eternal snow with rosy light."

"Ahem! Speaking of that snow reminds me of another scheme that flashed through my fertile brain a few moments ago—I wish I had another cigar, sir, I really do."

"Never mind, I find one here in my case," said Basil. "While you are unfolding that new scheme of yours, I will smoke."

"That is right, sir, make yourself perfectly at home. Put your feet up beside mine on this post, sir, and blow the smoke in my face if you like. I love a second-hand smoke, if the cigar is a good one."

Basil smiled at the schemer's effusion, and and lighted his cigar. When it was fairly a-going, he said:

"Now, go on, Mr. Jiggers, unfold that new scheme of your remarkably fertile brain."

"It is very simple, sir," assured Jiggers. "It is connected with that snow. That snow, sir, has been a great stimulus to my imagination."

"I should say so."

"And you would make no mistake. Well, sir, my scheme is to build a toboggan slide down that mountain, and run it the whole year round. It is very simple, sir, for the snow away up there can be sluiced down the slide in sufficient quantities to keep everything running smoothly. It will be patronized to a wonderful extent, and our pockets will overflow with wealth. Aha, sir! Be gash, it takes a man of brains to think of such things!"

"You are right!"

"Then you favor the project?"

"I have not said so."

"But you must, sir, you must. It is so exceedingly simple. Why, there are millions in it!"

"Yes—in the soup."

A look of sadness passed over Mr. Jiggers's face.

"Can you jest on so serious a subject?" he cried.

"Oh, it is no jest, I assure you!"

"You give me relief. I feared it was."

"But how are you going to get the sliders to the top of that mountain?"

"Aha! that is another scheme! I will have a steam-engine planted up there, and in that manner I will work an endless cable. That cable shall be so arranged that a hook can be inserted and an object drawn up from the foot of the mountain. I will have it run on its upward course directly above an arrangement like the slide, and it will be about three feet—perhaps four—from the surface. Then all the sliders will have to do is have a hook attached to the rope of their toboggan, get on, attach the hook to the endless cable and slide up the mountain!"

"What do you think of that, sir?" and Jiggers brought his hand down very forcibly on Basil's knee.

"It is simply astonishing!" laughed the sport.

"I knew you would say so!" asserted the Man of Schemes, proudly. "Will you tell me of another man in this wide world who could have devised such a money-making scheme?"

"I cannot."

Mr. Jiggers coughed in a very aristocratic manner.

"And I knew you would say that!" he bowed.

"That is a matter of dollars and cents—"

"Of dollars, possibly," admitted Basil, "but not of sense."

The schemer did not seem to catch the pun.

"Oh, I am not so sure of that," he observed. "Of course, we can collect double fare—one for sliding down the mountain and one for sliding up the mountain."

"Yes?"

"Certainly."

"Where will you obtain your sliders?"

"What?"

"Where will your customers come from? Surely you will not expect Tar Heel to knock off business and to go to sliding up and down that mountain?"

"Well, I don't know."

"I thought you had not considered that point."

Mr. Jiggers meditated a moment, and then a

placid smile on his face was partially concealed by the gathering shadows.

"The fame of this slide will extend abroad and bring people here all the summer round. We will make this a great railroad center, and Denver will lose her prestige. I will devise a scheme to bring Canadian immigration pouring in here. In fact, sir, I think my scheme will have a direct result and bring about the annexation of Canada with the United States. In that case, of course the Government would not let me go unrewarded, and so I would kill two birds with one stone."

"I see."

"Of course you do, and I know you will want an interest in the great American Canadian Toboggan Annexation Co. I will let you in on the ground floor. You shall have a hundred shares at one-fourth value. Your fortune will be made!"

"You are too kind!"

"Oh, kindness runs in the Jiggers family! Say, you couldn't advance me a little something on those shares now and take my note for the amount, could you?"

"I am afraid I will have to consider about taking hold of the scheme; but I will make you a small loan, however. You may repay it when you get the slide running."

"All right, sir, all right! You have my word of honor, sir, the amount of the loan shall be paid with the first receipts from the slide, and a Jiggers never breaks his word."

"Will a tanner do?"

"Quite well for the present, thank you."

"Here you have it."

With a dignity that did not entirely conceal his eagerness and delight, Mr. Jiggers froze onto that ten dollar bill.

"Remember, sir," he said, "you shall be paid with the first money made by the slide."

"I will not forget it," laughed the Sparkler Sharp.

Just then Mayor Sedgewick was seen passing. Basil noticed Jiggers watched the man with great interest. When the mayor was a short distance down the street, the Man of Schemes arose, begging to be excused.

"I have a little business that must be attended to at once, sir," he explained.

Basil was quite willing to be rid of the fellow, although Jiggers proved amusing at times.

The schemer followed Owen Sedgewick down the street, and both disappeared in the gathering darkness.

"A strange fellow, that," mused Basil. "I can not quite fathom him, for I do not know whether he is mighty shrewd or a mighty big fool. I almost fancy he is a shrewd fellow, who depends on his preposterous schemes to work upon others to let him have money. Every time I see him he has a new scheme, and he does not hold to anything more than a few hours."

"And he took a fancy to follow Owen Sedgewick. I wonder what he can want with that man? Can it be there is anything between them? If so, I may not find Mr. Jiggers a very healthy companion, for it is sure Owen Sedgewick has no friendly feelings toward me. That is, I feel certain he has not. It would not seem strange to me if he turned out to be my secret enemy—the one who has caused me so much trouble. He may be disguised. By Jove! that white hair may be false!"

The thought nearly took away Basil's breath, and for a long time he sat in silence, while the darkness gathered more thickly. Day had vanished before the encroaching steps of night.

"I would give much to know the truth," the sport finally muttered aloud. "If Sedgewick is truly my enemy he will reveal the fact before long. He can not keep it hidden much longer. Well, he shall find me no mean foe. He has power here, but I will make a strong battle right in this town. He shall not drive me out!

"I am not ready to leave Tar Heel. I must see Doris—and there is Bess. She is all alone in the world, and I would befriend her. If she will only let me, I will be as a brother to her. She shall have the education she much desires—she shall be a lady. But I wonder if that will make her happier than she is now. She is wild and free—careless as a mountain song bird. If she becomes a lady, will she not be disgusted with the show and shallowness of society? I can give her a place in society by keeping in the background myself—can give her a place higher than I could attain. My money—my diamonds—bah! gold will buy anything but true love in this world!"

Plainly the Spotter Sport was in a cynical mood for a moment. He continued:

"But will she accept my aid? That is the question. She is proud. How shall I influence her? I scarcely know. That is something for me to study on, and it will bear a great amount of thought. The thought of depending on my charity would be repugnant to her proud spirit. How can I—

"Ha! what was that?"

He leaped to his feet. There was a rustle at the end of the veranda, and then a shadow disappeared.

"An eavesdropper!" exclaimed Basil.

With a single bound he reached the end of the

veranda and was at the corner of the building. He saw a figure running away in the darkness.

"Stop, there!"

In a twinkling the sport was after the fleeing form.

And then—

He never knew exactly what struck him, but something sent him reeling to the ground, and a million stars twinkled and flashed before his eyes. He was stunned for the time, but he realized it was a trick of his Unknown Enemy, and that he was in danger of instant death. For all of that he had not the strength to do battle for his life.

The fleeing figure had turned. Now it came bounding back toward the fallen sharp, and a ray of light from the hotel struck upon something in the man's hand that glistened like steel.

Basil Rodman was on the verge of death! The man reached the fallen sport—the knife was lifted!

"Now, curse you, you die!" softly snarled a hoarse voice.

The crack of a revolver sounded close at hand, and a cry of pain burst from the would-be assassin's lips, as he reeled back, dropping the knife.

"You miser'ble whelp o' Satan!" cried a clear voice. "I hope I've jest everlastin'ly socked ye fer keeps!"

Wild Bess was around!

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LETTERS ON THE KNIFE.

The girl bounded forward, and, as she did so, the person who had attempted to murder the sport turned and fled for his life. Bess had fancied him hard hit, and his movements took her by surprise.

"Chain up that, Cully!" came shrilly from her lips—"chain up ur chaw bullets!"

But the man did not halt.

"Then you git it!" gritted the girl, and she took a snapshot at the fleeing figure. The following moment the man dodged around a corner and vanished in the darkness.

"Ef he hain't luggin' two bullets in his carcass it hain't no fault o' mine," grimly muttered the girl. "I shot ter putt'em thar, an' I hain't missin' ever' day, you bet yer boots! Daddy l'arned me ter drive nails, an' I kin shoot purty comfortably well in ther dark."

"Let's see w'at's ther matter with his royal highness. I don't reckon that galoot got a dig at him, but suthin' knocked ther critter over. Hello! he's routin'!"

Basil was struggling up.

"I say, partner," and the girl bent over him, "what's ther trub?"

"Bessie!"

"Holy smoke! It's ther shiner!"

Till that moment she did not know it was Basil.

"Bessie, I—you have—saved—"

He fell back.

"My God!" cried the girl, going down on her knees and gathering his head in her arms. "He is killed! Thet devil has done for him arter all! No, no, it can't be! Spenk ter me, pard—say suthin'! Whar be you hit? Tell me that! Oh, Heaven! ef he is killed! Pard, pard, can't ye speak? He's dyin'! Oh, he mustn't croak now! I can't let him die—I can't! Ef he dies I'll kill myself! Ef he dies I'll run ther devil down ther done ther job! Speak, pard—speak!"

But Basil could not speak.

Wild Bess was nearly distracted. She began to sob and moan, and then her head went down and kissed him again and again.

"Don't die, pard!" she entreated. "I don't want ter live ef you die! I hain't knowed ye long, but it will kill me for ye ter pass in yer checks this yere way! You're a man—ther best man I ever saw! Ef you die—'What can I do fer him—w'at can I?'

She fancied her words fell on unheeding ears and her kisses on the lips of an unconscious man.

The pistol-shots had been heard, and several men came out to see what the matter was.

"Whar's ther corpus?" coolly asked one.

They had not seen the girl who was crouching beside the wall of the hotel. She was about to call to them when she felt Basil stir, and his lips softly whispered:

"Bessie, girl, I am all right."

Had she been alone she would have screamed with joy, but now she controlled herself. The men who had come out of the hotel saw nothing to attract their attention.

"Reckon it wuz some drunken whelp shootin' off his gun fer fun," said one.

The others accepted this as a probable explanation, and then they all went back into the building.

When they were gone, Bess asked, softly:

"Thet critter didn't stick ye, pard?"

"No," answered Basil, "thanks to you."

"But w'at made ye keel over—w'at tuck ther stutlin' out o' ye in this yere way?"

"I received a blow on the head."

"W'at hit ye?"

"I do not know."

"Waal," and she drew off a little, "I thought ye wuz done fer."

He did not stir, but he felt his strength returning. The feeling of the one soft arm that

still supported his head filled him with a satisfaction he had not known for years. She was obliged to lower her face close to his in order to look into his eyes, and he felt her warm breath on his cheek. He would have lifted his arms and clasped them around her neck, but he feared the act would frighten her.

"It was strange that blow so robbed me of my strength," he said. "I knew that fellow came rushing back—I knew my life was in deadly danger, but I could not lift a hand to protect myself. For a moment I believed my time had come—I thought my enemy would triumph over me. And then—"

"And then?"

"I heard your shot—I saw the fellow stagger back—I saw him turn and flee. I tried to stagger to my feet, but my senses reeled. The next I knew, you were here. I felt I was saved, but I was still powerless."

"I wonder if he heard an' understood my words?" thought the girl, her face flushing hotly. "My gracious! I hope not!"

"Again you have saved me, Miss Bess," came earnestly from Basil's lips. "I know not how I shall ever repay you."

"Don't ye think o' that now. I don't want no pay—I won't take no pay! I'm all right, an' ef I kin spile ther game o'er measly whelp like ther one as tried ter wipe ye out, it's nuts ter me."

"You seem to be my good angel."

"Oh, git out! I bain't no angel!"

"Well, you are mighty near one!"

"You must still be off yer base."

"No, I am not."

"Don't ye tell me that! That blow muddled up yer head, else ye'd never talk like this!"

"My head is clear enough now."

"Then I reckon you kin set up alone."

"Oh, I don't know about that!" he quickly protested.

"Waal, jest you try it."

"In a moment, let me rest a moment more!"

"All right."

"Your arms are so soft!"

"Soft! Wat yer givin' us! I've got a muscle like a brick! I low it must be your head that's soft, pard!"

"Oh, say, that's rough on me!"

Then they both laughed.

"I'm goin' ter dump ye, pard, ef you don't git a brace on!" asserted Bess.

This threat caused Basil to sit up with such suddenness that the girl gasped:

"Say, you're all right!"

"Correct."

"You've bin playin' rats!"

"Think so?"

"Yep."

"I assure you—"

"Now don't ye lie, pard! You've bin foolin' me! I kin tell by ther way ye try ter talk. I'm outer you, an' you can't wool me!"

Still Basil declared he had not been shamming, and she was forced to accept the situation. They both arose to their feet, and he held out his hand.

"Shake!" he cried.

She placed her brown fingers within his grasp. "Fer ninety days!" she laughed.

"I wish it might be forever!"

She started, and he saw her staring hard at him through the darkness.

"Say!"

"What?"

"I don't keer fer ther kind o' fodder!"

"Not if I am in earnest!"

"Oh, drop it! I've g.t my eye-teeth cut, ef I be a gall! Ef you an' I are goin' ter be pards, thar bain't to be no sunny business, jest min' that! I've got a powerful bad temper, an' I might git started. W'en I git started, it takes all creation ter stop me."

"You must be dangerous!"

"Oh, I be!"

He was forced to laugh at her earnestness.

"Say, let's drop this," she said. "We want ter find out who tried ter wipe ye out."

"It was my Unknown Foe."

"Waal, why don't ye hant him up an' git an interjuce?"

"He keeps shy."

"He kem mighty nigh gittin' warped a short bit ago. An' hyer's su'thin' as he drapped." She picked up the knife with which the Unknown had tried to end Basil's life.

"This may be valuable!" he exclaimed.

"You bet!"

"If I can find out to whom this knife belongs—"

"You'll hev yer man spotted."

"Sure enough."

"I say, pard, w'at fer hev you got an Unknown Foe?"

"You have asked me something, I am not sure I can explain, but I fancy he is the friend of some man whom I have brought to justice. You know I am a detective—belong to the Rocky Mountain Detective Agency, of Denver. I have been instrumental in bringing many criminals to justice, and that is why I am called the Spotter Sport, as you probably know."

"Yep."

"It is no more than natural I should have foes."

"Ye're right."

"This one is most persistent. He has dogged me for nearly a year now, and time and again he has struck at my life. It must be Providence has protected me, for I still live."

"Tell ye w'at!"

"Yes?"

"We'll down this yere Unknown Foe, pard, an' we'll down him fer keeps. Let's go over yen whar ther light comes frum ther winder an'take a look at this knife."

They moved over to the window.

"Thar," said Bess, "hyer she am. By ginger! thar's letters on ther blade hyer!"

"What are they?"

"I dunno; you see."

He took the knife.

"O. S. Great Scott!"

"W'at is it?"

"If those letters do not stand for Owen Sedgewick, I would like to know why not?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BASIL GETS THE DROP.

WILD BESS was amazed.

"W'y, he's ther mayer, pard!"

"And he's my meat!"

"But he can't be ther critter ye're lookin' arter!"

"Why not?"

"Sedgewick's a white man."

"That is what Tar Heel thinks; but I may have the pleasure of showing them otherwise. Ten to one, he is some criminal in disguise who is hiding from justice. He fears me, and so he would put me out of the way. Well, he has made a mistake in waking me up! I shall give him a very warm time."

"Waal, ef he's your mutton, count me in on ther first floor. I'm with yer ter ther last whoop."

"Now that I know where to look, I fancy I shall be able to close out the game with little trouble."

"Ther mayer is a powerful bad man with his guns."

The light from the window showed a quiet smile on Basil Rodman's face.

"You have never seen me shoot, have you?"

"It hain't ther shootin' so much as ther gittin' ther drap."

Like a flash of light a pair of revolvers appeared in the Sparkler Sharp's hands. Where they had come from it was impossible to say, for he had seemed to make no move to draw a weapon. It seemed as if, at command of his will, they had leaped to his hands.

Wild Bess started back.

"Howlin' cats!" she cried.

"Was that swift enough?" inquired Basil.

"Waal, that'll do," was her confession. "I reckon you must be run by chain-lightnin'!"

He laughed.

"I can get out a gun pretty quick when it is necessary."

"I sh'd say so! All you've got ter do is play that on ther mayer an' he'll fall dead fruni surprise."

"Which would spoil my fun."

"Thet's 'cordin' ter bow ye look at it."

They talked a few moments more, and then parted. Basil lighted a fresh cigar and sauntered down the street.

"I wonder where I shall find this Owen Sedgewick?" he said, to himself. "I know not where to look for him. He visited the Mountain Palace last night, and he may show up there to-night, unless Bess put enough lead into him to keep him away."

Straight to the Mountain Palace he went. The door of the saloon was wide open and the crowd was gathering within. He entered.

Jerry Jiggers was almost the first person to catch his eye. The Man of Schemes also saw the sport and made his way toward Basil.

"Have you come around to buck the tiger to-night?" inquired Mr. Jiggers.

"I may try the animal a whirl," replied the sharp.

"You are very lucky with the beast?"

"I have been in the past."

"Well, I have a scheme, sir, a remarkable scheme—a system by which any faro-bank may be broken."

"Other men have had schemes before you, and their systems were usually worthless."

"But my system is original with me."

"That is what you think."

"I know it, sir. For a small amount I will reveal it to you. You will be certain to make your fortune. The scheme is worth hundreds—yes, thousands of dollars; but as you are a particular friend of mine, I will give you the entire outline for—for—well, say ten dollars."

"It is not worth ten cents to me, Jiggers. You have got one ten from me to-day, and I am not in the spirit to fed over a mate to it. No, I have not the time to listen, even though you would unfold it gratis."

A very sad look settled on Mr. Jiggers's face.

"You do not know what you are missing, sir," he declared.

"Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to know too much. But you are the very man I want to see."

"So?"

"Yes. I want to inquire if you know what became of Owen Sedgewick? I saw you following him down the street."

"Saw me following him? Oh, no, sir, you must be mistaken! I did not follow him; I came directly to this saloon to—ahem!—to see a man."

"Then you know nothing of Sedgewick's whereabouts?"

"Not I."

Basil's eyes seemed to pierce the schemer, and Jiggers's gaze fell before that searching look.

"Well, I would like to see him," said the Sparkler Sharp, slowly. "I have something for him."

"Pardon me," and Mr. Jiggers smiled in a very sugary manner, "I believe you are a detective, sir?"

"You do?"

"Yes, sir. Am I correct?"

"You are."

"Good-day, sir—or, er—I mean good-evening," and Jiggers had suddenly grown very nervous. "I just happened to think—pressing business. Will you excuse me? Yes, thank you. I am in a fearful hurry. See you later—if I can't help it."

The sharp barely heard the last words, as the Man of Schemes hurried away.

"Well, well!" laughed Basil. "It is plain he does not care to have anything to do with a detective. Can it be that fellow is a crook?"

He watched Mr. Jiggers till that worthy disappeared by the door, casting an apprehensive glance backward as he went out.

"Hooray!" cried a voice that had the sound of whisky in it. "Hearsh zer bully boysh wizzer glash eye—hearsh zer fellersh as wearsh di'minsh all over himself! Look at him; hain't he a reg'ler jim-jim! Whoop!"

It was Uncle Jaggs, and the tramp seemed to be staggering under a heavy load. Plainly he had been indulging to his heart's delight. He came reeling toward Basil, a drunken look of admiration on his greasy face.

"Woosh!" he gurgled. "I'm a holy tear, I be, an' zere's ze boysh as guv me monish ter git whisk! Oh, he'sh a darlin', he ish. Hip, hip, hooray fer him! I shay, boss, I hash been drunk ever shince lasht night. You wash mighty kind ter guv an ol' cush like me 'moneys ter git drunk on!" And then, with an attempt at soberness, he added: "If I had moneys, I'd never draw 'nozzer shober breash longsh I lived. It'sh tough on a man ter have ter shober off after such a glorious spreash zis!"

From the corner of his eyes Basil saw Owen Sedgewick enter the saloon and approach the spot.

"So Jiggers has told him," thought the sharp. "He has come to see what I want. Well, he shall find out. I will be ready for business."

The mayor surveyed Uncle Jaggs a minute, then turned to Basil, observing:

"Ther' is apt to be a funeral in Tar Heel tomorrow."

Once more those revolvers sprung into the sport's hands.

"And you are liable to be the subject," retorted the Sparkler Sharp, covering the mayor with the ready weapons.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CONFRONTED BY THE EVIDENCE.

THEN there was a tableau.

The Mayor of Tar Heel did not attempt to conceal his surprise.

A sudden hush fell on the room, only broken by the gurgling cry of Uncle Jaggs!

"Th's zer stuff! He'd make a boocherful corpus!"

Owen Sedgewick looked at Basil Rodman's revolvers and then at the Sparkler Sharp's face.

"You observe I hold the drop," said the sport, calmly.

"I see, sir," was the reply; "but what is the meaning of this?"

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"The horse of fancy is a gay creature to ride, but it sometimes takes a strong hand and a hard bit to master the animal. Have a care you are not thrown."

Basil showed his teeth in the least bit of a smile.

"You mean that for a threat, as I can plainly see."

"It is evident you do not have to have a thing beaten into your head, sir."

"You have a large amount of gall to threaten a man who has you covered!"

"Do you think so?"

"I surely do. How can you be sure I will not blow you cold without giving you a show?"

It was Sedgewick's turn to laugh.

"Of course, I can be sure of nothing while dealing with such a man as you. I have had enough dealings with your class to know them pretty well."

"And that means—just what?"

The mayor made a gesture of appeal.

"I trust you will not compel me to become offensive in my speech."

"You can not be more offensive by speaking out what you mean than you can by insinuating. In fact, it will be a great deal more satisfactory all round if you will talk square, and not beat around the bush."

"So?"

"It certainly is."

"Well, then, to be plain, I have dealt with gamblers enough to fully understand their treacherous nature. Of course, I am not certain you will not shoot me down without giving me a ghost of a show."

Basil Rodman's face took on an added tinge of color, but he still remained cool and collected.

"I thank you for making clear your insult," he said, with deliberation. "I wish a perfect understanding between us."

"Don' bozz'r wish him!" cried Uncle Jaggs, drunkenly. "Don' bozz'r wish zer cuss, shiner! Shoot him full of holesh! Th's zer stuff!"

"Particular friend of yours, I presume?" and Sedgewick jerked his thumb toward the old tramp, while he looked inquiringly at Basil.

The sport did not appear to notice the mayor's scornful words.

"I was a little bit too soon for you, Sedgewick," he said. "You were speaking of a funeral when you came up, and I know you had your eye on the individual you intended for the corpse."

"Ah! You are very discerning!"

"I was able to penetrate you."

"You think so."

"Sure."

"But I fancy you are somewhat off your bias."

"Of course, you will not admit it. If you did not have your eye on me when you made that remark about a funeral, who—"

"My dear sir, I did."

"Then you confess it?"

"It is no confession—simply an admission."

"I knew I was not wrong."

"All the same, you were 'way off if you thought I was gunning for you."

"Ha! you deny that?"

"Most assuredly."

"I suppose you consider it the best way to get out of the fix your are in?"

"Not at all. I acknowledge you hold the drop, but if you ever made a fool of yourself, you are doing that thing now."

Basil looked the white-haired mayor fairly in the eyes, and Sedgewick returned the gaze steadily. Just the ghost of a doubt crept into the sport's mind, but he was not going to be taken off his guard.

"That sounds very well from your side, but there are always, at least, two sides to everything."

"Yes; a right side and a wrong side."

"You have named them."

"And you happen to be on the wrong side this time."

"You say so, but that does not make it so. If you did not mean me when you spoke of the funeral, just who did you mean?"

Owen waved his hand toward the intoxicated tramp, who was looking on with owlish gravity.

"Can you ask?"

"He was the one you meant?"

"Exactly."

"You darned sus-sinner!" gurgled Jaggs. "I'll knock your headsh off in— My grashush!"

The look which the mayor gave the inebriate was enough to send him staggering backward with such suddenness that he tripped and sat down on the floor so heavily he jarred the whole building. Then he rolled over and began to creep away on his hands and knees, muttering thickly, in a sing-song way:

"An' my funeralsh ter-morrer!"

"Your friend is retreating," observed Sedgewick, sarcastically.

Basil had been studying the mayor. The impression that he had known this man some time in the past was stronger than ever upon him, and he resolved to speak of it.

"I fancy we are not entire strangers."

Then Owen did start a bit. The sharp's keen

eyes saw that, and a sudden feeling of satisfaction swept through his breast.

"Hit the target plum center that time!" he thought.

"I must confess you have the advantage of me," said Sedgewick, slowly.

"And do you always speak the truth in your confessions?"

"Sir!"

"Turn about is fair play, Owen Sedgewick, or whatever your right name is. You heaped it onto me thick enough a short time ago, and now you must not wince if you get touched a bit where it is tender."

"It is safe for you as long as you hold the drop."

"But would not be if you held the drop."

"I shall not deny it."

"I thought not. Nor will you positively deny we have met in the past."

"I saw you last evening in this saloon."

"And you saw me years ago—somewhere. Where?"

"That is for you to say."

Basil fancied the man was keeping himself under control by a great effort, and it almost seemed to the sport that Sedgewick was in fear he would name the time or place they had met outside of Tar Heel. With each passing moment the sport's conviction that they had surely met became firmer until there was no doubt in his mind. Still he could not recall the place or the circumstances of such a meeting.

"I scarcely think your memory needs refreshing," he asserted. "You recollect both the time and place, as I can see from your face."

"Are you a professional?"

"A professional what?"

"Mind reader."

"If I were, you would scarcely wish me to read your mind at the present moment. Did I do so and speak my discovery aloud, you would frantically deny all."

Sedgewick laughed sneeringly.

"What does all this talk amount to?" he cried. "You are holding the drop on me while you try to talk me to death! Well, you will soon succeed, for I am growing weary."

"You may find lots of time to rest behind prison bars."

For a moment the mayor's face became white as that of a corpse, and then he fairly hissed:

"Another insinuation! Oh, you are safe now you have me covered with your guns, but if you do not take advantage of your present position—"

"What then?"

"It shall be a vendetta! I shall shoot you at sight when next we meet!"

"I am a bit spry on the shoot myself. If that is to be the way of it, I shall surely try my level best to pull trigger first, and when I do pull trigger there is always a funeral afterwards."

"You are an excellent boaster."

"Best of all, I back up my boasting."

"I have heard scores of men who are now dead talk that way."

"You have lived much beyond your time. Tar Heel needs a new mayor."

"Possibly you aspire to the office?"

"Not I."

"Well, you stand a good chance of promotion."

"Ah!"

"Yes, you are apt to go up higher. There will be a rope around your neck when you do."

"Another threat, and I take it for what it is worth—nothing. You are powerful in this camp, but long before I fall beneath the tribunal of Judge Lynch you are apt to be standing before the Bar of God!"

Sedgewick fell back before Basil Rodman's flashing eyes and stern face.

"That talk sounds pretty," said the mayor, slowly; "but I do not know as I understand you. Come to the point. What does this all mean, anyhow?"

"You know well enough, but for the benefit of these people who are listening, I will explain. I have an enemy—a cowardly wretch who has tried times without number to take my life. I have not been in this town two whole days yet, but this enemy has already struck at my life four times since I reached the vicinity of this camp. He does not come out openly, like a man, but he uses all the wiles and tricks of the dastardly assassin that he is. He has never met me face to face, and till to-night I have not known who he was. It seems that the Hand of Providence has been instrumental in saving my life from his cowardly attempts to take it."

Owen Sedgewick was listening with interest, a strange look on his face—a look of relief! Basil saw the look and did not understand it. He went on:

"If this man came out openly and met me in a fair manner, we would not be long in settling the matter. But that is not his game. He seems to fear me, and yet he hates me with an undying hatred. To-night—a short time ago—he struck at my life once more, and I was saved as by a miracle. He dropped something—tied—left a clew behind—and I have it!

"That was what brought me to you, Owen Sedgewick. That was what made me so quick to get the drop when you asserted there would

soon be a funeral in this town. I have it here."

Basil thrust his left-hand revolver out of sight, and with the same motion he produced the knife with which the unknown assassin had attempted to take his life. Flashing it before the mayor's eyes, he cried:

"Here it is!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A THREE DAYS' TRUCE.

The crowd pressed forward and stared at the weapon. Owen Sedgewick looked at it with interest.

"Well?"

The word fell from the mayor's lips.

"Do you recognize it?" demanded Basil.

"I do not."

The Sparkler Sharp laughed.

"I knew you would say so."

"Then you wasted you time in producing the blade."

Sedgewick was very cool now.

"Do you really think so?"

"That is evident enough."

"Did you ever see this knife before?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Well, I do admire your gall! All the same, there is a mark on the knife."

"A mark?"

"Yes—the owner's initials."

"And they are what?"

"There they are on the blade; you can see them for yourself."

Basil held the knife so the mayor could examine it, but at the same time he thrust the muzzle of his ready revolver almost against Owen's forehead, a thing which Tar Heel's magnate did not seem to notice in the least.

"Look at them!" cried the sport. "Tell the people here what they are."

"O. S."

"And those letters stand for—"

"Owen Sedgewick!" cried some one in the crowd.

The mayor had his enemies in Tar Heel, and they were glad of an opportunity to seize on something that looked black against him. Not daring to come out openly and face the man, they now fancied they saw in Basil Rodman the person to "remove" the mayor.

"Those are my initials," quietly admitted Owen.

"And the knife—"

"Is not mine!"

Again Basil laughed, but there was nothing pleasant in the sound.

"I thought perhaps you would not deny it," he said. "I thought it possible that when you saw the proof placed before your eyes, you would step out like a man and—"

"Be shot like a dog!"

"That is not the way the Sparkler Sharp disposes of any enemy. Although you have time and again struck at my life in the most cowardly manner, I am ready to give you a fair show—you must meet me on equal terms. Surely you cannot get out of that."

Something like surprise showed for a moment on the mayor's face.

"Is that what you ask?"

"It is."

"But I deny being your enemy—I deny ever before seeing this knife—I defy you to produce a living being who has ever seen the weapon in my possession!"

"I should think much better of you if you would face it out, now you are cornered."

"But I am not cornered. There are hundreds of men in the world whose initials are O. S."

"But not in Tar Heel."

"Still there may be one other. Even though he is not known by a name those letters would fit, he may be here. You know as well as I that many men sail under false titles in the West."

"Yes, and I have thought Owen Sedgewick might not be your right name."

Again the mayor started a bit, but he swiftly recovered, and said:

"In which case there would be all the more reason to believe this knife does not belong to me."

Mentally, Basil was forced to confess this was true, still his belief that he had struck his true enemy without a doubt was not shattered—only shaken.

"Sedgewick," he said, "come out like a man and acknowledge yourself caught at last. Then we will fight it out in a fair and square manner. You shall have an even show with me, and if you down me, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you did it honestly."

"Never yet in my life have I downed a man in any other manner—never yet have I tried to do so. But I swear you have made a mistake here—I am not this secret foe of which you speak, and this knife I never saw before you produced it a moment ago. I am not a man to strike any one in the back, as the men of Tar He

"You do not believe that!"

"That knife would exonerate me."

"And doing so, it would perform the most dastardly work it ever did."

Basil was stumped; he knew not just what to do. He was not the man to dispose of an enemy in cold blood, even though that enemy had repeatedly struck at his life. But doubts had arisen in his mind; was it not possible he was wrong? Perhaps after all Owen Sedgewick was not the man.

"Well, what will you do about it?" asked the mayor.

"I am not going to shoot you down in cold blood."

"I will stand a trial."

"My only proof is this knife. No, I feel that a trial would not convict you."

"Then give me a chance to clear myself in your eyes—that is all I ask. I now understand how it came about you thought me your enemy, and I scarcely wonder at it. But the men of Tar Heel will tell you I am not a man to strike a foe in the back. I do not think I have an enemy in this town who will accuse me of that. If I have had trouble with any one, I have met them man to man, face to face."

"That's so!" shouted one of the mayor's friends.

"Ev'ry time!" chimed in another.

"Hooray fer Owen Sedgewick!"

Then a cheer went up.

The mayor turned toward them, saying briefly and frankly:

"I thank you, friends, for I see you still have confidence in me. Still it must be acknowledged your confidence is not enough to exonerate me. In some manner I must convince this man I am not the dastard he thinks me to be. All I ask is time for that."

Basil suddenly lowered his revolver.

"You shall have all the time you ask—or all that is reasonable," he declared. "Meanwhile, I will keep this knife."

"That is right, sir, for I surely do not want it. If I cannot convince you you have made a mistake, I will agree to meet you on equal footing three days from now! Then we will settle the affair at the mouth of the pistol. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly."

"That being the case, I will bid you good-evening."

Basil bowed, and Sedgewick turned away. Without once looking back, he strode from the saloon, the sport's eyes following him till he disappeared through the door.

"Why didn't ye shoot him?" inquired Uncle Jaggs, as he came staggering up. "Oughter shotted him ri' whar he lives—yesh ye had."

Basil turned away, not even glancing toward the inebriate, who repeatedly tried to call for three cheers, but managed to say three beers each time.

Just then a man thrust his head in at the door and yelled:

"Fire! fire!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FIRE'S WORK.

IMMEDIATELY there was a rush for the doors. "Where's the fire?" demanded a dozen voices, but the one who had given the alarm did not pause to reply.

Out into the street poured the throng, and they saw men rushing toward the western end of the town, so they joined with the rush.

Basil followed more leisurely, and barely had he left the saloon when he found Wild Bess at his side.

"O. K., pard, top o' th' heap!" exclaimed the strange girl. "Sedge didn't try ter climb ya or ter work auythin' crooked, which wuz mighty lucky fer him."

"How is that?"

"I hed him under my gun."

"Where were you?"

"At a winder."

"Oh, you were looking into the saloon all the time?"

"You bet yer boots."

"Well—"

"Well, you did git ther drap on him baucherfully, though I 'lowed ye w'u'dn't w'e'u I saw him comin' fer ye."

"I got the drop, but that was all it amounted to."

"I c'u'dn't hear all ye said. But I 'lowed you guv him bellylewyer."

"Well, it amounted to nothing."

"I saw ye let him off."

"For a time."

"Thet'll be long ernough fer him ter get a wipe at ye."

"I shall try to look out for that. But let's get to this fire."

Keeping together, they joined the people who were rushing toward the fire.

"I wonder where it is?" and there was some anxiety in the sport's voice.

"Out at ther west eend, pard," replied Wild Bess; but she suddenly understood why he seemed anxious, and she added:

"I don't reckon it can be thar."

They hurried along till they came in sight of the flames, then a cry burst from Basil's lips.

"It is therel!" he hoarsely shouted.

A cabin was burning, and that cabin the one that had been occupied by the woman mystery of Tar Heel, Rena Lenoir!

Basil dashed forward at renewed speed, but the girl kept at his side, saying:

"Most likely she's out all right. You kin see ther hull derned ranch is blazin'."

They dashed up to the assembled crowd, and the Sparkler Sharp began to anxiously inquire for Rena. To his disappointment and despair, no one seemed to have seen the little blue-eyed mystery.

"I reckon she's in thar now," said one old fellow, solemnly.

A great cry of horror and grief broke from Basil Rodman's lips.

"In therel! My God! my poor little sister!"

"W'at?" exclaimed Bess, catching his arm.

"Wuz she thet?"

"Yes," he answered, chokingly, "she was my sister."

"Waal, I will be derned!" muttered the girl.

There was now no hope for any one within the burning cabin, but for all of that, Basil would have rushed in had he not been held back by strong hands. At length he gave up, and stood staring grimly at the flames.

Wild Bess had kept by his side, and she ventured to speak to him. He did not heed her, and she grasped his arm.

"Mebbe she wuzn't in thar," the girl said, earnestly. "Mebbe she got out 'fore ther fire got ter goin' bad."

He shook his head.

"If so, where is she now?"

Of course the question could not be answered.

"I'd never guy up tell I known fer sur," the girl asserted. "Whar thar's life thar's allus hope, ye know."

"But I believe there was foul play here!"

"W'at?"

His stern eyes looked into hers, and the red firelight fell on their faces.

"That is what I think," came steadily from his lips. "I believe this was the work of my enemy."

"No, no!"

"I feel sure of it."

"How should you have an enemy who knew she was your sister?"

"That is more than I can tell, yet I believe I have. He has failed in striking at my life, so he takes this dastardly and inhuman course."

"Ther critter 'd be too mean fer ther hot place!" indignantly declared Bess.

"And that's what he is."

"It c'u'dn't be Sedgewick, fer he didn'thev time ter do this work."

"Ahl but my enemy has tools—vile wretches who stand ready to do his dirty work."

"Pard, you be right!"

"Then you think it may have been Sedgewick's plotting?"

"It may hav bin, but I don't hardly reckon it wuz."

For some time he remained silent, gazing into the flames. There was a black cloud on his handsome face.

At length, Bess observed:

"I hed a talk with ther leetle woman terday."

"You did?"

"Yep."

"When?"

"Jest arter you left me, w'en we hed bin bluffin' Horror Hank's gang. She saw ye."

"Saw me? I meant to have kept from her sight. I wonder if she knew me?"

"I reckou. But I 'lowed she must be mis-
taken, an' she seemed ter kinder think so her-
self—said ye wuz planted, an' all that stuff."

He passed his hand over his forehead, and a dazed look came into his eyes.

"She thought I was dead," he muttered, slowly. "Well, I suppose it was natural. I was dead—dead to the world and to her; dead to my old home and the love of long ago."

"Your name hain't Basil Rodman?"

"She told you that?"

"Waal, she tuck ye fer somebody else, an' w'en I 'lowed yer name wuz Rodman, she guy in ther she must be mistooken."

"It is better she did not know the truth, poor girl. It would have done no good, and it would only have raked up the past. Still, had I seen her and talked with her, she could have cleared away the fog that seems to cloud my brain. I can't grasp everything. At first, I did not know her—I did not know she was my sister! It came to me gradually, and when I did know it for a fact, I knew not what barrier kept us apart. I was aware of its existence, but I could not define it. It was between us, but what is it? Some day I shall grasp it, and then the clouds will vanish."

Bess looked at him in awe. He was the strangest man she had ever known, and for that very reason she loved him the more.

The fire sunk lower and lower, the walls of the cabin fell in, and it lay a blazing mass of ruins.

One by one the crowd turned away, but still Basil Rodman stood there, his arms folded and his gaze fixed on the fire.

Wild Bess lingered near.

It was past midnight when the sport turned away. In a moment Bess was at his side.

"You are goin' ter ther hotel?" she asked.

He flung out his hands.

"I don't know where I shall go!" he said, brokenly. "I shall not be able to sleep. I will see you to-morrow. Good-by."

She stood and watched him till he disappeared in the hazy gloom of a cloudy night.

Basil spoke the truth—he did not sleep. All that night he wandered the streets of Tar Heel—searching, searching, searching. He had a vague idea he was looking for his sister, and that kept him moving on and on. For all that his brain seemed dazed, he had the appearance of a man keenly on the alert, and if the eyes of his Unknown Foe saw him as he wandered like a restless ghost through the darkness, that foe did not dare make another stroke at his life.

Morning came. The sun rose and flooded the mountain wilds with mellow light, and the birds sung their sweetest songs.

Still a sad-faced haggard man wandered back and forth along the principal street of the little mining-camp, and he was not aware the darkness had given place to light—he did not hear any of breaking day's sweet sounds. Early risers who met him cast one look into his face, and then hurried on as if frightened.

At last he awoke as if from a trance, and he looked around in wonder.

"Another day!"

What should he do? He had not slept, but he did not feel the need of sleep. He had not eaten, but he fancied food would choke him.

"I will go and see Doris," he muttered.

He took no thought of the early hour until he had almost reached the widow's home, then he paused in dismay.

"It will never do!" he exclaimed. "Why, I almost doubt if she has thought of rising by this time."

For some minutes he stood in an undecided frame of mind, and then he determined to walk past the house.

And so it came about that, as he was passing, he saw a figure plucking flowers, which grew in profusion before the cottage. He halted in astonishment.

"It is Doris!" he exclaimed.

She looked up and saw him.

"Why, Mark, is it really you?" she cried, surprised.

He advanced toward her.

"Yes, it is I," he answered, and his voice was unnatural.

"I am a woman of business now, and I have to do so. But, how pale and tired you look! I do not believe you slept at all last night!"

She held out her hand, and he accepted it.

"You are right, I did not sleep at all," he confessed.

She urged him to enter the house, and he consented. As they disappeared together, a figure arose from behind some bushes, at the opposite side of the road.

Wild Bess!

CHAPTER XXXII.

LOVERS ONCE.

BASIL RODMAN was beset by conflicting emotions as he followed Doris Dalton into the cottage. He remembered his love of long ago, and he wondered if she still cared for him other than as an old friend and an acquaintance.

And he?

He questioned his own heart in vain. The night just past had sorely tried him, and he was scarcely the cool, and nervy man of yesterday. Although he questioned his own heart, he could not tell if he still loved this woman.

Once he had worshiped her—she had seemed all the world to him. He still believed she had loved him, but she loved position and wealth more. When he learned that, he was driven nearly mad, and what followed caused him to do the deed that made him an outcast and wanderer.

These thoughts passed swiftly through his brain as they entered the cottage home. He did not try to suppress them, for they came and went before he realized their presence. And they left an uncertain, doubting man behind their touch.

He looked around. They entered a cozy little parlor where everything was so comfortable that it was almost luxurious—not quite that. Had it been, the comfort would not have been there. It was a wonderful little room for that rough town, far removed from the great railways.

"Will you be seated, Mr. Eudane?" A cry escaped his lips and he started toward her.

"What? Mr.—Eudane! Yes, yes! You called me that—it is my name!"

She had recoiled a step, amazement and fear written on her face. What did such a singular move mean? Even as she asked herself the question, he placed one hand to his head, muttering:

"Don't—mind—me. I am scarcely in my right mind this morning."

"Your head—"

"No, it is in my heart."

Their eyes met, and her black orbs fell before his steady and piercing gaze. Her lips moved, and she murmured:

"I know what it is. For years there has been a pain in my heart."

He remained gazing at her, although she again motioned toward a chair.

"You are still beautiful," he said.

The word sent a thrill of delight over her, and, within her heart, she cried:

"He loves me!"

Then all the years that lay between that moment and the past seemed to fade before her. He was her handsome and manly young lover once more. How she had adored him in those old days! He was so strong, so manly, so fearless! There was nothing he did not dare, and once she had believed he would conquer the world. Then she thought she loved him dearer than everything else.

But poverty! That was the specter that had risen between them—that was the demon that had rent them asunder. He had only strong hands and an active brain with which to carve his way to fortune. Might he not fail?

Ah! that horrid thought! What would failure mean? She shrank from it. Although she loved him, her heart cried: "Anything—anything but poverty!" She had seen enough of it, for had not her father twice failed in business, losing every dollar he possessed in the world the last time, and then blowing out his brains? If poverty would drive a man to that, was it not a monster to be shunned?

But how could she give up this handsome young lover who stood ready to lay down his life for her? It was like tearing the life from her soul—the heart from her breast. But greed triumphed, and he was sacrificed.

And now—now she would not think of that. Had she not suffered enough? Fate had brought them together again; why should not the dream of long ago be realized?

"You are still beautiful!"

Those words rung in her ears—they were like heavenly music. All these many years she had tried to preserve her beauty—she had feared it would fade. She had taken the best of care of herself—she had exercised daily. Living close to nature, she had retained the flush of health that makes any woman of refinement beautiful.

When another had called her his—a lawful husband—she had dreamed of the days to come. What of them? Hope had burned like a star in her heart. A wife though she was, she had no love for the prosaic middle-aged man who claimed her as his own. She believed in fate, and something told her fate would bring her lost love to her some time.

Then her husband died—the galling chain was broken. But where was the lover of long ago? An outcast—a wanderer on the face of the earth—a man with human blood on his hands!

But she loved him as she had in the long ago.

Waiting? The days had dragged drearily by, but something told her he would come. She had not been deceived—he was here! The waiting was over! He had called her beautiful. What was there between them now!

Ah! there are often invisible bars that keep two souls apart—barriers unseen by mortal eyes. They stand face to face—they almost touch, but that unknown barrier separates them as rigidly as if worlds lay between them.

It was thus with the two who stood face to face in that little cottage parlor.

With a deep breath that was like a sigh, Basil sunk into the seat. For a moment he covered his eyes with his hand, trying to brush away the misty cloud that still bothered him. Then he looked at her.

She had turned away and was gazing out of the window for a moment, but her eyes did not see the slight girlish figure on the boulder at the other side of the road. Her eyes saw nothing outside the cottage.

She soon turned back.

"I am glad you came, Mark."

She spoke as steadily as her emotion would permit, and for years she had been schooling her nerves not to betray her secret to the man who called her wife.

"Are you?"

He asked the question mechanically, and his tone was a disappointment to her.

"I know you are ill!" she cried, coming toward him. "I can see it in your face; and you said you had not closed your eyes during the night."

"No, I did not sleep."

"What made you restless?"

"I was out to the fire."

"I saw the flames from the door. What burned?"

"A cabin over at the other side."

"But it was not that which made you restless?"

"In a great measure—yes. Of course there were other things. I walked the streets till morning. I saw you yesterday."

She started. That explained it all. A feeling of exultation again seized upon her. He still loved her as of old. There was no doubt about

it. If not, why had the sight of her caused him to spend a sleepless and wretched night?

"I must control my feelings!" she thought, as she came toward him and sunk into an easy-chair. "He must not know I still love him till he has confessed the truth. Then—oh, the joy of that moment! I will be in his arms once more!"

And he was mentally saying:

"Yes, she is still beautiful, but I seem to see a strange look in those dark eyes—a look that was not there in the years gone by. I do not like it, for somehow it reminds me of her falsehood."

Silence fell between them; what could be said?

"I little dreamed of finding you here when I came to Tar Heel," asserted the sport. "Long years ago I gave up ever seeing you again."

"An—I feared I should never meet you again," she softly declared. "That fear has been the horror of my life, for I have wished to tell you how sorry I am."

"Sorry?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"Can you ask? Mark, I know I did wrong!"

He looked at her keenly. Her bosom was heaving like the surface of a storm-tossed lake; the color was coming and going from her fair cheeks. Great Heaven! what a picture she made! He felt his blood stirred, but, strangely enough, he did not feel drawn toward her.

"That is past," he said. "Let's forget it."

"But it is not so easy to forget. I have tried in vain to forget, and I knew I should never be easy till I had seen you and told you the truth. Once—once after you disappeared I heard you were dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes; but I did not believe it."

"Did Rena?"

"I do not know. You know our quarrel—yours and mine—separated me from Rena. I never knew what she believed."

"Well, the past is past, and only the future is before us. That looks black enough for me!"

She looked at him compassionately.

"Why should it look black?"

"Can you ask that?"

"Yes. I had thought all the blackness lay before me, but you seem to have brought a ray of sunshine."

Could he fail to understand that? If so, he had lost the ready wit of the old days when such words would have made him claim a dozen kisses from her lips. He seldom got but one, even though, scarcely more than boy and girl, they had pledged themselves to each other.

Basil shot her a quick glance, and he saw her eyes drop before it.

"Can it be this woman loves me still?" he asked himself.

Then he arose to his feet.

"I am glad if I have brought you so much as a single ray of sunlight."

"Then you hold no grudge?"

"None."

She arose and held out her hand.

"Let's call it settled."

"Willingly."

He clasped her fingers. They burned in his palm, but for all of that, they sent a chill over him.

"When we part we shall feel better now," he said.

"When—we—part!"

The color died out of her face, and a look of appeal appeared in the eyes that met his. It was as if a lance had pierced her heart.

"Yes."

"But—but must we—"

She did not finish; he understood.

"How can it be otherwise?"

She took her hand away and turned from him. He saw she was trembling, and he put out his arms—only to quickly withdraw them.

"No," he thought, "it is not my place now."

For some moments they were silent. She turned back at last, and the fingers of pain had touched her beautiful face.

"Mark, you can never know how much I have suffered!"

"You should have been happy."

"I was anything but that!"

"Still the desire of your heart was yours."

"The desire of my heart?"

"Wealth."

"That was mine, but that was not the desire of my heart. What I desired most was love!"

"And that you cast aside."

"True, true! Fool that I was!"

"Do you think so now?"

"I know it!"

"But love would never have satisfied you without wealth. You hated poverty."

"I did—I hate it still! And do you wonder? I was reared in luxury only to be plunged into destitution by my father's failure. Think of it! Not ten hours before he took his own life, my father told me money was all there was in the world to give a human being happiness."

"He worshiped it!"

"Perhaps you are right. I know he was wrong in one particular."

"And that?"

"Money will not give happiness without love!"

"That is a lesson you have learned!"

"Yes; a bitter one."

"I fear you have not learned that love will give happiness without money."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this: Could you give up all you now possess for the love of a man with nothing in the world?"

She hesitated a moment, then replied:

"It is not necessary."

"No?"

"No; for what I possess is mine. If love comes, too, then I have both wealth and happiness—and wealth is a great adjunct to happiness, I assure you."

"Your words avoid my question, but your hesitation answered it."

"How?"

"It told me you would never give up your possessions—not even for the old love."

"To do so would be to give up my hope."

"Your hope?"

"Yes, my hope to return East one day and re-enter society. I would be a belle, Mark, for you have told me I was still beautiful. I would be a queen among them all!"

A look of pain settled on his face.

"That is enough!" he said, turning away.

She sprang forward, her white hand falling on his arm.

"Enough!" she echoed. "What do you mean—what can you mean?"

His brown eyes pierced her like daggers.

"You are the same as of old—treacherous! I fancied you had changed, but I was deceived! You would sell your heart for gold! You cast aside the love of a man who thought you an angel—cast it aside for wealth! And were the conditions the same, you would not hesitate to do so again! Doris, I know you for what you are!"

She was crushed by his mad words. She turned very white, and then he saw her swaying blindly, her hands outstretched. He sprung forward and caught her in his arms.

At that very moment Wild Bess passed so close by the window that he could look in upon them.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"A BUNDLE OF FIRE AND FURY."

FOR a moment Doris Dalton lay in Basil's arms, then she suddenly started from him.

"You are cruel!" she hoarsely cried—"cruel, cruel!"

"And thus were you once, years ago!"

"Is it thus you seek your revenge?"

"I seek no revenge."

"And yet—"

"I simply spoke the truth."

She had moved away, but she suddenly turned back, stretching her arms to him.

"Mark!" she cried; "I love you still! Listen to me! You can never know the tortures I have endured! Oh, the long and weary years! All the while I have loved you!"

"You were another man's wife!"

"For all that, I loved you—and I prayed for you. He never knew."

"And he held a false wife in his arms!"

"False—no! How dare you!"

"Not false in act, perhaps, but false at heart. You were his wife, but you loved another man."

"Yes, yes!"

"Doris, the dream is shattered! All these years I have longed for this time to come, but I never thought it would. Now it is here, it brings nothing but bitterness! I thought I loved you still; now I know I love you no longer!"

Had he struck her in the face she would not have reeled backward more suddenly. Then she flung herself on her knees at his feet, gasping:

"Mark, Mark, Mark!"

He was sorry he had uttered those words, but it was too late to recall them.

"Doris, forgive me!"

"Then you do love me?" she cried.

He sadly shook his head.

"Don't say no—don't, don't! You are the only man I ever cared for, and it will break my heart! I have all the wealth I can desire, and now poverty need not keep us apart. There is no barrier between us!"

"You are wrong! Between us stands the barrier of a dead love!"

"No, no!"

"It is true. More than that, another thing separates us. There is blood on my hands—the blood of one who fell in a duel."

parlor floor lay the beautiful woman who had sacrificed love for lucre!

How long she lay there, Doris did not know, but she was aroused by a sharp voice in the little hall:

"Git out o' ther way, you son o' darkness! Yer bet yer sweet life I am comin' in!"

"But it am 'ginst de orders!"

"Hang the orders an' you too, Sambo! Git outer my trail, ur I'll run ye down! I'm wuss then a steam injine w'en I git a move on! I'm goin' ter see her."

Doris hurriedly arose, and she had barely gained her feet when the door opened and Wild Bess appeared.

"Waal, hyer ye be!" cried the girl. "I told thet chunk o' midnight I wuz comin' in ter see ye, but he 'lowed not. All ther same, ef he hedn't got out o' my line o' march I'd knocked ther corners offen' him! Thet's ther kind o' er sardine I am!"

"It was James," said Doris. "He has orders to admit no one without permission."

"Waal, I bu'sted ther rules an' reggylashuns wide open that time."

"Who are you?"

"I'm a holy terror on trucks, an' my handle's Wild Bess."

"I do not know you."

"An' I don't know you, but I reckoned I'd come in an' see ther kind o' er woman that c'u'd win ther love o' ther jo-dumdest best man in this hull gol-derned creation!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't beat roun' ther bush—you know w'at I mean. He's a dandy, an' you're in luck!"

"I do not care to talk with you."

"Waal, don't ye talk, then. Jest you set down thar an' let me do ther talkin'. I hev come in hyer ter talk, an' I hain't goin' ter be beat out o' ther fun, you bet yer gizzard!"

"This is disgraceful!" exclaimed Doris, with dignity. "I cannot listen!"

"Don't see how you're goin' ter git out o' it. You're a little bit bigger then I be, but I'll bet ye a dollar I've got ther most muskil. Ef it comes ter a scrap, I kin flam ye every time."

"You are a most offensive person!"

"Shol! You're another! I don't think none too much o' you, fer I'm a bit stuck on ther shiner merself. I hain't no lady, an' I know he hain't fer me, but I don't want ter see him beat in this yere mattrymonial business, an' that's why I'm hyer. Say, I don't like yer style."

"Will you leave the house?"

"W'en I git good an' reddy, not a blamed bit afore. I'm a stayer, I am. It takes a hull crowd ter bluff your'u truly, Bess Bristol."

"I will call James and have you put out!"

"Say!"

"What?"

"Does it run ter you?"

"What run to me?"

"Ther insurance on his life. There'll be a dead nigger 'round this yere ranch ef he puts them black hands on me!"

The widow began to grow alarmed. Wild Bess had sat down on the arm of an easy-chair, and was swinging one foot in a careless manner, but there was fire in her dark eyes.

"I wish you would go!" said Doris.

"I hain't a doubt o' it, but I'm goin' ter tell you w'at I think o' you, fu'st. "You hev got money an' you kin fling on style, but you hain't no more fit ter merry ther shiner then I be. I don't like your look, an' I reckon you're treacherous as a cat. Ar-rr-rr! I'd like to scratch you!"

Bess started toward the woman, who retreated in terror, crying:

"James! James!"

The negro instantly appeared.

"W'at am it, ma'am?" he asked.

"Show this—this creature out."

"By golly! I didn't show her in, but she kem jes' de same. Come, miss, you's got ter go."

"Is that so? Goin' ter putt me out, eh? Waal, Blackness, you hain't built right!"

"She's a regular bundle of fire and fury!" exclaimed Doris.

"Shall I sack her, ma'am?" asked James.

"I think you will have to. Remove her in some manner."

"I'll do it."

The negro started toward Bess, but he suddenly halted.

"Bet yer two ter one ye don't, Sambo!" laughed the girl, as a pair of revolvers appeared in her hands, and were thrust almost against the darky's nose. "Try it, an' I'll blow the wool off the top of your head!"

"De good Lawd!"

With that exclamation, James fell flat on his back, his face almost seeming to turn white with terror. The widow uttered a stifled shriek.

"I hain't ther gal ter be sacked," asserted Bess. "All ther same, I hain't got no further business hyer, so I'll go. Putt me out! Waal, I sh'u'd smile!"

"Good-day, ma'am. Ta, ta, Jim," and she backed out of the room, much to the relief of both the inmates.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR. BUMM AND BLIND BEN.

"WELL, Benny, my boy, we are all O. K. How do you feel this bright morning?"

"I feel happy, sir."

The speakers were Mr. Bumm and the blind boy, and they were seated on a bench just outside a little cabin, back among the hills near Tar Heel City.

"I am glad 'you feel happy,' the vagabond assured. "I, too, am feeling excellent. The sun is bright and the birds are singing."

"I can feel the warm sun, and I can hear the little birds. The birds always seem to be happy, sir. I wonder if they are ever sad?"

"I think they must be sometimes," answered the man, taking the lad on his knee.

"I suppose that is when they do not have enough to eat and are cold?"

"Well, you have come pretty near it. You know the birds all go South when the winter approaches?"

"I know they go somewhere, for I miss them so much, but no one ever told me where."

"Well, it is away to the South where it is always summer. Sometimes some of them get left in the North, and then winter comes on and they perish of hunger and cold."

The boy gave a cry of pain.

"That is terrible! Oh, the poor little birdies!"

"Well, it is rough on them. But we must not think of that. We should be thankful we have enough to eat."

Blind Ben clapped his hands.

"Oh, isn't it splendid to have enough to eat!" he cried. "I don't know as I ever, ever had enough to eat before last night. You are so good, sir!"

"Nonsense! It is not me! This is Wild Bess's cabin, and it is her food we have eaten. She was kind to let us come here."

"Oh, very kind!"

"She's a brick, that girl is! But I wonder what can have kept her out all night! She did not come in at all, and she is not here yet. I am worried about her."

"You don't think—"

"I don't know what to think, Benny."

"Perhaps Brandon has hurt her!"

"No, I reckon not."

"She took our part; he will never forgive her for that. He will hurt her if he can find a chance."

"Well, he will have to be smart to get ahead of Wild Bess."

"I am so afraid he will come here!"

"I do not think there is any danger of that."

"You will not let him take me if he does come?"

"No."

"Oh, I do not want to go back to Granny, for she will beat me so! She will be fearfully angry, sir."

"Well, she will have to vent her anger on the air. She and her worthy son can pull each other's hair to their hearts' content."

The boy put his arms about Bumm's neck.

"You are an awful good man!" he exclaimed. "I never knew there were such good people in the world!"

"Benny," said the mendicant, soberly, "you make me blush! I have not had so much taffy before for years."

"What's taffy?"

"Oh, you don't know, and I am afraid I cannot explain to you. Anyway, it is something good."

"I am glad, for you ought to have everything good. If only my father had been like you, I would have been so happy!"

"I trust he is a better man than I!"

"Ob, no, Brandon is not like you at all!"

"But he is not your father, my boy. You know I told you you were stolen. That man and that old woman stole you from your real parents."

"And I will find my true father?"

"It is doubtful if you ever do; still you may. We will hope so."

"Would I have to leave you?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't want to find them!"

The man was strongly affected by the blind boy's words, and he held little Ben close in his arms.

"You do not understand what you are saying," he declared. "Your parents may be wealthy—they may have spent hundreds of dollars—thousands—tens of thousands searching for you. Their hearts may be so lonely and full of pain without you. If they could see you, it might fill them with joy."

"Oh, do you think so?"

"Yes."

"Then we will search for them—won't we? We will find them."

"Ah, you do not understand how big the world is. We may not find them though we search the remainder of our lives."

That seemed to fill the blind lad with wonder and dismay.

Thus they talked on, while the morning sun crept higher and higher. Bumm was nervous and looked again and again down the narrow path that led toward Tar Heel. Where was Bess? Why did she not come?

"Benny."

"Yes, sir."

"I may have to go to Tar Heel."

"Can I go with you?"

"I am afraid it will not be best for you to. Brandon might be there and see you."

"But must I stay here?"

"Will you?"

"You will come back soon?"

"As soon as I can. I must know why Bess does not return."

"Then I will stay."

"You will not be lonesome?"

"No, for I will have the birds and the trees for companions. I can talk to them, though they will not talk back."

"And you must not go away from the cabin."

"I will not, sir."

"Then you will be all right. I think there is little danger of Brandon coming here, and I shall hurry to get back."

"Will the good lady come with you?"

"I think so, if I can find her."

"I want her to come. I cannot see her, but I want to touch her with my hand."

"God bless you!"

Bumm seemed changed, as he hurried down the path. He was more upright, more manly. He began to appear like a person who could look the world in the face. If one day could make such a change, what would a longer time accomplish?

"That boy has brought new life to me," he muttered. "I am a different man. Still I do not forget the blood on my hands. But for that, I might be living with her now. She is dead—died of want while I was a fugitive from justice. They did not know me when I came to look on her face as she lay in the Morgue. Had they known me, I would have been cast into irons, and I might have died like a dog!"

Thus musing, he approached Tar Heel. Just before the path reached the regular trail, he stumbled over a body lying in the path.

"What is—Great God! the little girl! She's dead!"

Then a haggard face was lifted and a pair of eyes, red with weeping, looked up at him.

"Not dead," replied Wild Bess, hoarsely; "but I wish ter God I wuz!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

RECALLING THE PAST.

FROM the widow's cottage Basil Rodman returned to the hotel. His brain was filled with a thousand surging thoughts, and as he walked along, he muttered aloud:

"She loves me still—that is plain enough; but I—I love her no longer. She is not the same as she seemed in the flush of early manhood—she does not seem as she was long years ago. Ah! just how many years have passed? A portion of the time has been like a shadow—I remember little of it. That bullet came near taking my life, and I would to God it had!

"What is there in the future for me? It looks blacker than ever now—and God knows it was black enough before! For a long time the cloud that hung over my brain caused me to forget Doris, then, little by little, I began to remember. At first, it was only glimpses of her face I would seem to see; I could not recall her name, but I vaguely knew I loved her once—loved her madly.

"As time passed on, I remember plainer and plainer. I could see her as she used to look, but never till yesterday did her name come back to me. Then, when she left me, I remembered it all like a flash.

"And my own name—that bothered me too. I knew it was not Basil Rodman, but what was it? How many times I asked myself the question, and how often was it on the tip of my tongue, only to slip me when I tried to utter it! I despaired of ever remembering. It did not surprise me when she called me Mark, but Eudane that was the surprise, and that is my rightful name. One thing she has done for me—she has lifted the clouds, and I can look back into the bitter past.

"It is the blood of my own best friend I have on my hands! Poor fellow—poor Lewis! And still he was guilty, and his fate was no more than he merited! Mine was the hand to punish him!"

"I must go back to the hotel—and try to rest. My head is in a—fearful whirl. I am sick and faint. My heart seems bursting with a great pain! Oh, Rena, Rena—where are you? Did you perish in that fire last night? No, no, no!"

When he reached the hotel, he tried to eat something, but food stuck in his throat. For years he had not touched liquor, but now he took a drink at the bar.

The Sparkler Sharp.

him to awake with a start, and almost a scream. And that filled him with anger.

"Am I going to break down and go all to pieces in a night and a day?" he cried. "I have been called cool and nervy, but if this continues, my coolness and nerve will be gone with another twelve hours!"

Again he tried to sleep, and again his brief slumber was visited by appalling dreams. He sprung to his feet, a smothered cry breaking from his lips, then he stood staring blankly around the narrow room for a moment before he could collect his senses.

"It is impossible!" he hoarsely muttered. "I cannot sleep. It is worse than remaining awake. I must go out and learn if Rena's bones have been found amid the ruins."

He put on his coat and descended the stairs, contemplating taking another drink. At the foot of the stairs he was met by Owen Sedgewick.

With an effort Basil braced up and held himself ready for the attack, which he more than half expected. He felt sure the mayor would try to put him out of the way before the three days' truce passed.

"Howdy, pard," called the magnate of Tar Heel.

Basil bowed stiffly.

"I want to have a little chin with you," said Sedgewick, looking the Sharp straight in the eyes.

"All right; drive ahead."

"Not here. There is a private room—"

"In which you have a nice little trap!"

"No."

"No?"

"That is what I said. There is no trap there. I simply tell the truth when I say I want a private talk with you. I do not care to run the risk of being overheard. I give you my word of honor there is no trickery about it."

"Lead on."

"Follow me."

For all of Sedgewick's pledge, Basil was not so sure treachery was not intended, so he prepared for it. The mayor did not hesitate to lead the way, and, as the sport followed, he thrust a hand into the side pocket of his coat, grasping the butt of a handy revolver.

"If they down me before I can take a snapshot from my pocket, they are rustlers," he mentally observed. "I will do my level best to perforate the Mayor of Tar Heel before I am snuffed out."

But Owen Sedgewick spoke the truth. No trick was intended. The mayor led the way to a small room, which he declared was strictly private. He motioned Basil to a chair, and the sport sat down, first taking care to alter the position of the chair.

Something like a grim smile crossed Sedgewick's face, and he said:

"That is right, Mark Eudane, make sure there is no trap beneath you."

The Sparkler Sharp was on his feet.

"You know me!" he cried.

Owen bowed.

"I have that honor."

There was something like an insult in the final word, but the sport did not resent it then.

"In which case, I fancy I have made no mistake," he said.

"How?"

"You are my Unknown Foe!"

"If by that you mean the man you claim has made so many attempts on your life, you are wrong—I am not."

"You still deny it?"

"Most certainly I do."

"Then how comes it you know my name?"

Mayor Sedgewick took a letter from his pocket.

"Here is something I received last night," he said.

"Well?"

"Well, it contains very interesting reading. I will not take the trouble to read it through from first to last, but I will give you an outline of its contents. Sit down again."

The magnate calmly took a seat, and Basil sunk back into the chair. Sedgewick drew the inclosure from the envelope and glanced over the contents before he began speaking. He was very calm and deliberate, and there was triumph apparent in his face and manner.

"This was placed in my hands after our little trouble in the saloon," he began. "It happened at the fire. I felt it thrust into my fingers as I was standing with the crowd, gazing at the flames. I looked to see who placed it there, but I was not successful. Whoever the man was, he did not betray himself."

The white-haired man paused, but Basil said:

"Go on."

"You are eager to hear?"

"Somewhat."

"Well, this letter declares you a murderer and a fugitive from justice!"

The nerves of the Spotter Sport were not shaken by the declaration; his face did not change in the least, but a bit more fire flashed from his dark brown eyes.

"A charge easy to make, but hard to prove," he said.

"Perhaps so," confessed Owen.

"Who does this anonymous epistle say I murdered?"

"Your best friend!"

"Ah?"

"That is, one whom you had always believed was your best friend—Lewis Lenoir."

A hard look settled on the face of the sharp, and his hands clinched. Something like his usual coolness had returned for a time, and he deliberately asked:

"The letter does not claim he was in truth my friend?"

"Oh, but it does!"

"It does?"

"Yes."

Basil had half started to his feet, but he sunk back into the chair, a grating laugh coming from his lips.

"Then the writer knows nothing about it!" he asserted. "That man was the worst enemy I ever had on earth, and I do not regret that I shot him dead, like the dog he was!"

"You are growing excited, sir!" calmly declared the mayor, in whose eyes something like a light of satisfaction was gleaming. "You have a reputation for nerve, but you are liable to lose it at a single stroke."

"I have good reason to become excited. That wretch ruined my sister!"

"Married her, you mean."

"The marriage was false!"

"This letter says not. It says you believed the marriage false, but it was legal."

"Which makes it all the plainer the writer of the letter knew nothing of the truth. I saw the proof—or my memory plays me foul just now when everything seems clearest. For years I have been unable to recall the truth, but it has gradually come back to me."

"The writer of this claims the marriage was legal, but you were led to believe it false. Then you hunted Lewis Lenoir up and forced him into a duel."

"When I discovered his dastardly act, I did hunt him up and forced him to fight me."

"You refused to listen to his explanation?"

"Yes."

"He tried to explain, and you struck him on the lips?"

"Yes, again! I refused to listen to his lies."

"He was passionate, and with the sting of that blow goading him on, he fought you?"

"True."

"Both fell?"

Basil bowed.

"Ah! this letter has the facts straight enough in some respects. You will acknowledge that? You did not give Lenoir a chance to prove the truth. He might have been able to do so."

The sport made a protesting gesture.

"Impossible!"

"So you think. Well, you fought, and both fell. You were seriously wounded about the head, and he—"

"I sent a ball through his black heart!"

"Exactly so, and thus you stained your hands with murder, for you forced him into the fight."

"He was as good a shot as I—was called a better shot."

"That makes no difference."

"He did his best to kill me."

"Which does not lessen your own crime, for you forced him to his death. Besides refusing to listen to his explanations, you swore you would kill him like a cur without a show if he did not meet you. It was his life or yours, and he knew it. Even then he might have spared you by firing into the air, had you not struck him; but his passion was aroused by that blow, and he was enraged to a point that overcame his reason. He forgot you were the brother of his wife."

"His wife?"

"Exactly, for this letter, as I told you, claims the marriage was legal."

"Which is a dastardly lie!"

"I expected you would say so. However that may be, the fact remains that you are a murderer. You forced a quarrel with me, and you have given me three days to prove my innocence of your charge. Still you have not proved me guilty. A man is always considered innocent by intelligent persons till proven guilty; but I do not intend to fool with you a little bit."

Their eyes met, and neither shrank before the other's gaze. Of a sudden the sport seemed to see something that caused him to start and catch his breath, then his eyes fairly devoured Owen Sedgewick's face.

The mayor firmly continued:

"I am going to give you till night to get out of Tar Heel. If you do not heed my warning and go, it will be much the worse for you."

"You threaten?"

"I do. I know how to deal with men of your kind. Judge Lynch may sit on your case tomorrow, and, should I read this letter in court, you would swing from the nearest tree. You had best be sensible and take warning. I do not want to snuff you out, but I shall be forced to do so if you do not get. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand. But let me tell you a little something, Owen Sedgewick: I am not a man to be bullied or driven an inch. If you were fifty instead of one, I should stay and meet you! And you would not have it all your own way either."

The Mayor of Tar Heel tried to conceal that look of admiration which came unbidden to his eyes.

"You are rash!" he cried.

"Rash it is, then."

"Remember, I know you."

The Sparkler Sharp sprung to his feet, crying: "And I know you, Wallace Wicby, forger and fugitive from justice!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LOOKING BACK OF THE CLOUDS.

SOMETHING strangely like a curse broke from the mayor's lips, and he also sprung to his feet. Whether or not he intended to draw a weapon, he did not do so, for a revolver gleamed in Basil's hand, the muzzle thrust almost against Sedgewick's forehead.

Standing thus, the two glared into each other's eyes.

Strange expressions passed over the mayor's face; he seemed shaken by conflicting emotions, but fear was not among them.

"Well," he finally said, "you have run me down."

Basil looked surprised.

"Run you down?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"I do not understand you."

"You are a detective?"

"I am."

"You did not come to Tar Heel for fun."

"Not exactly."

"I knew you as soon as you struck the place."

"In which case you had the advantage of me, for I did not know you till a minute ago. Your white hair has made a vast change in your appearance."

"I suppose so. I thought you did not know me, and I hoped to drive you from the town before you learned the truth. I have failed, and—Well, I am ready!"

He held out both hands.

"What do you mean?" asked the sport in surprise. "Ready for what?"

"The irons."

"Is that what you expect, Wallace?"

"Of course."

"Well, I have no irons for you."

It was the mayor's turn to be surprised.

"I am afraid I do not understand," he said. "You have found me out."

"Yes, but you are not my game. Did you think that?"

A strange look of mingled doubt and relief settled on Owen's face, and he did not seem able to believe the evidence of his ears.

"I am not your game?"

"No."

"Then who is?"

"Tiger Scott, who murdered Mrs. Franklin, of Denver. A big reward has been offered for his capture, and I traced him this way, but I scarcely fancy he is in Tar Heel. If so, he has succeeded finely in keeping out of my clutch."

"Well, may I be shot!"

Owen Sedgewick's amazement was genuine.

"I had no doubt I was your game," he added, "and that is why I resolved to drive you from the town."

Basil lowered the revolver, thrusting it out of sight in a handy pocket.

"And I believed you my enemy," he said.

"Wallace, I have not forgotten we were schoolmates together—I have not forgotten you once saved me from drowning, at the risk of your own life. We were warm friends in the old days, and I am a friend to you still."

"But you forget—I am a criminal!"

"And what am I?"

The two men—parted for years—looked into each other's face, and a tender light stole into their eyes. For a moment they were boys again.

"Mark!"

"Wallace!"

Their hands met in a firm clasp—the clasp of undying friendship. From that moment either would have fought to the last gasp for the other.

"It is strange we should come together like this, after so many years," said the Sparkler Sharp.

"You are right. I thought we should never meet again, and when I saw you here in Tar Heel I was amazed. Then, when I learned you were, Basil Rodman, the well-known Spotter Sport, I was certain you had become my enemy."

"How could you believe it, Wallace?"

"I fancied time had changed you, and you had resolved to hunt me down. I have not forgotten those bitter words you spoke when you aided me to escape the hands of the law. You told me you did so on account of our past friendship, and you hoped to God we should never meet again. I thought you had learned to regret that act, and to make it square, had decided to bring me to trial."

"No, no! You must have fancied me greatly changed."

"Well, in a measure you are right; but it does not make all men thus. As in all callings, there are both heartless and tender-hearted men who are detectives."

"I suppose so."

"But you could not have known of the duel?"

"The letter told me of it."

"Then the letter is no fake?"

"It is genuine. You know I have been unable to keep trace of things about the old home since I fled from there—a forger."

Then the two men sat down at the little table and talked over old times. That talk did the sport good, for most of the scenes recalled were pleasant ones. Finally, Basil declared:

"I believe your white hair was what kept me from recognizing you at first."

"It is probable."

"What caused your hair to turn white? It was once black as the raven's wing."

"Black."

"What?"

"I bleached it."

"No?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"To all in my disguise, for I knew some of the people from the old home might see and recognize me. My face has also changed."

"True."

"I believe the disguise' good."

"And so it is, for it seems natural."

"And it deceived your eyes."

"Which was not a fair test, for my mind was in a foggy condition."

"From what cause?"

"The duel."

"You were wounded?"

"Lewis Lenoir's bullet plowed along my skull. An inch lower and it would have caused my death."

"And that—"

"That wound robbed me of memory for a year. I could recollect nothing of the past."

"Strange!"

"It was truly strange. A friend cared for me—got me beyond the clutch of the law and kept me concealed."

"That friend was—who?"

"Aubry Kent."

"I remember him, but I never liked the fellow."

"I know you did not like him, but he proved a friend to me in my hour of need. He it was who showed me the truth of Lenoir's treachery toward my sister. He and one other were the only witnesses of the duel. He got me away and looked after me during all that long year that I could remember nothing—not even my own name. When things began to come back to me, he told me I had killed my best friend in a duel, but that was about all I could get out of him. He would not even tell me my true name, for he said I might betray myself, and so I came to be known as Basil Rodman. Not till this very day have I been sure of my true name. I could almost recall it—not quite. To-day I heard it from the lips of another. The clouds that have bothered me seem to be dispelled, and I remember all."

"My dear old schoolmate," said the mayor, "we have both been unfortunate."

"You are right. The hand of fate seemed turned against us."

"What became of Aubry Kent?"

"I do not know. We quarreled in New Orleans and I left him, telling him I did not want to ever see him again."

"And you never have?"

"From that day to this I have never seen Aubry Kent."

The mayor drummed nervously on the table, a scowl on his face. At length he shook his head.

"I am convinced Kent was not your friend at all," he said, soberly.

"What do you mean?"

"I believe that man brought the quarrel about between you and Lenoir."

"Impossible! What could have been his object?"

"That I do not know, but I believe he had one, and he accomplished his purpose."

But the sharp was not convinced.

"I cannot think that of Kent."

"You are disposed to regard him in a favorable light, while I never liked the fellow. He was proud and overbearing, even to his superiors. That made him hateful to me. And you have acknowledged you could not get along with him, for you quarreled and parted. What was the cause of the trouble?"

"He would not tell me things I wanted to know about the past."

"That is enough! Mark, Aubry Kent brought about your ruin and Lewis Lenoir's death!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A COMPACT—GONE!

THE Sparkler Sharp was not ready to believe that.

"You are inclined to be too hard on the fellow, Wallace," he said. "He could not have done what you claim. All he did was to convince me my sister had been wronged by Lenoir."

"And that was his plot! Now, having beard

this, I am convinced your sister was legally married to Lenoir. She has repeatedly told me so with her own lips."

The sport started up.

"Told you so!" he cried. "Ah, yes! I had forgotten she was here in Tar Heel—I had forgotten she perished in the flames last night!"

"That is something I am not sure about. But I may as well make a confession to you now, even though she swore me to secrecy. I will not try to deceive you longer, for I have no cause. Rena told me everything concerning the duel, but she believed you dead, as well as her husband. Kent led her to believe that, for both had disappeared. Then that man tried to induce her to marry him."

"What?"

Basil leaped to his feet, astounded.

"That was exactly his little game," the mayor went on, firmly. "When Lenoir was dead, he told her he had always loved her. In some way it came out that her marriage was a sham, and she was ostracized. He pretended to be her friend. For all of the aversion with which she was regarded, he told her he would marry her and lift her into a position where people would not dare scorn her. He talked as if he would be doing her a great favor, for he told her she was forever disgraced otherwise."

"The dog!"

"But she repelled and despised him."

"Brave little girl!"

"She was that."

"Now I understand why Kent would leave me alone for weeks at a time. I did not know where he went, but now it is plain. He went back to the old home."

"Exactly."

"The scales are falling from my eyes!"

"As they ought to have fallen years ago. Are you beginning to understand this man was your enemy?"

"Yes, yes!"

"To escape him and the scorn of her former friends, Rena turned all the property into cash and disappeared. For a time she kept clear of Kent, but, at length, he found her and renewed his suit."

"Oh, curse him!"

"Then she fled again."

"Poor little girl!"

"From place to place that wretch has hounded her for years. He even followed her to this town."

It is impossible to describe the Sharp's surprise and fury.

"Here!" he cried. "Where is he now? When was he here?"

"He was here yesterday; where he is now I cannot say?"

"Here yesterday!"

"Yes, I saw him. He was coming from the cottage where Rena was staying—the cottage that was burned last night. We came face to face, but I did not recognize him as Aubry Kent. Rena told me who he was, and then I went out in search for him. I fully determined to shoot the skunk, but I was unable to find him. He had disappeared in a most singular manner, and I have not seen him since."

Basil sunk down and rested his head upon his hands.

"Let me think," he muttered—"let me think."

A silence of several minutes ensued. When the sport looked up, his face was stern and hard.

"I am beginning to understand the truth," he admitted.

"I have not told you all."

"You have not?"

"No. After Lewis Lenoir's death a child was born to your sister."

"A child!"

"Yes, a little girl."

"What became of it?"

"There is where more of Aubry Kent's devilish work came in. He induced Rena to let him place the infant in hands that would take good care of it—so he said."

"Yes, yes! Go on!"

"Well, it is dead. You understand what that means?"

"Yes, it was murdered!"

"At Kent's instigation—yes."

"That human devil! If God ever lets us stand face to face, I will have his life!"

"Which will be perfectly proper. After Rena told me who he was, I went out gunning for him. It is a good thing for him I did not find him."

"I am glad you did not! If he is still in Tar Heel, we will meet! If he has fled, I will hunt him down!"

"Good!"

"For, by high Heaven, I believe it was his hand that fired the cabin last night! If Rena perished in those flames, her blood is on his soul!"

"I believe you have grasped the truth, Mark, and I will stand by you through thick and thin. Here is my hand on it. It is a compact."

Once more their hands met.

Aubry Kent's days were numbered!

"I do not think your sister perished in the fire," said the mayor. "I have caused the ruins to be searched, and no trace of her bones have been found."

"Then what has become of her?"

"She has fallen into Aubry Kent's power."

"You have struck it! Failing in all other means, he has resorted to the most desperate method to get possession of her! What's to be done?"

"I can command the town, if I desire. I will put Tar Heel after him. If he is anywhere near, he shall be run down!"

"Then let's get to work at once, for no time must be lost! If he is given enough time, he may get away."

The mayor knew this was true, and so they quickly left the little room together. As they came out, Wild Bess and G. W. Bummo came rushing up to them.

"There very man we're lookin' for!" panted the girl, as she grasped Basil's arm. "There ole devil's ter pay!"

"Yes, that is a fact!" agreed Bummo. "If I'm not mistaken, he'll get paid, too."

"What is the matter?" asked the sharp.

"Waal, you know I sent Bummo an' ther kid ter my ranch ter hang out las' night. They stayed ther, but wuz kinder worried 'cause I didn't come in."

"Yes, yes!"

"This mornin' Bummo tol' ther kid at ther cabin, while he set out ter hunt me up. He foun' me, an' we went back ter ther roost tergether. When we got ther, ther kid wuz gone."

"Gone?"

"Yep."

"Had wandered away?"

Bass shook her head.

"Nary wander, pard. He'd bin kerried off, fer things were mussed up ginerally, which showed ther'd bin a scuffle."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RENA'S FATE.

RENA LENOIR was alone in the little cabin that she made her home in Tar Heel. With a restless, nervous step she paced the floor, her hands clinched behind her.

On the little table a small lamp sat, shedding a soft light about the room.

It was plain by the look on the woman's face that she was thinking of the past—the bitter past. For a time her teeth were set and her face stern, but her countenance softened finally, and she murmured:

"My poor dead baby—my little Eva! I ought never to have allowed you to leave my arms—I should not have listened to his crafty words. What cared I for the scorn of the world! I was a wife—No, not a widow! And on his hands—my brother's—was my husband's life! It is well he was also dead!"

"But Aubry Kent was our evil genius. I am satisfied he brought all our misery about. It was through his evil scheming that my husband and my brother met their deaths. I did not know it at the time. Had I known it, I might have my child with me now!"

"Yes, that is true, for I firmly believe Aubry Kent plotted to get Baby Eva out of the way. I think the blood of the child is on his hands as much as if he murdered it with his own vile fingers! Poor little Eva!"

"But this man whom Owen Sedgewick, or Wallace Wicby, says is my brother! It is impossible! Mark is dead—there is no doubt about that. It is true the man looks as my brother might have looked after eight years, but the days of miracles are past. Mark has been sleeping in his grave long, long years."

"Mr. Wicby is my friend, and I believe him a good man, even though he is a fugitive from justice. He was a gay and thoughtless youth, and I believe he has fully repented for his folly. Yet the ban of the law is hanging over him, and he must needs keep beyond its reach. For old times he has befriended me. He says Mark befriended him in his greatest time of need, but, if so, I knew nothing about it."

"He went out to search for Aubry Kent. I wonder if they will meet? If they do, there will be blood shed. It is not strange he did not know Kent, for the man has changed from the slender and graceful man of the old days. Now he is corpulent and beast-like. His face—his eyes reveal the treachery of his nature."

"Hal! What is that?"

It was a knock on the door. Rena stood still in the center of the room, staring at the door, but making no move to approach it.

"Who has knocked?"

She asked herself the question. Was it Aubry Kent? or was it Wallace Wicby? If neither, who could it be?

Wild Bess!

She quickly approached the door, just as another cautious knock sounded on it.

"Who is there?" called Rena.

There was no answer, and she repeated the question.

"It is only I, ma'am," answered a smothered voice.

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

"Your name?"

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would not open the door, and so they would have to go away.

"No, I will not open the door," she declared. "Go away from here!"

There was a moment of silence, then she heard whispering outside. That filled her with terror, and she retreated to the table, where she stood staring at the door, trembling with fear.

What would be the next move of those outside?

She did not have long to wait before she found out.

"Get away!" growled a hoarse voice. "Let me git my shoulder 'ginst ther door. I kin take it offen ther hinges at ther fu'st jump."

The next moment a heavy body crashed against the door, which cracked and gave, but did not fall.

Rena was so terrified that she would have screamed, but her tongue seemed frozen in her mouth. She did try to cry out, but not a sound did she utter.

Again the body crashed against the door.

"She goes next time," growled the hoarse voice. "Guv me lots of room."

Once more the little cabin shook with the shock, and then the door went down!

Four persons came rushing into the room, one of them being a woman.

Old Mag, the Gypsy!

The men were Brandon, Horror Hank and Gentle Jim.

Like a virago, the old bag rushed at Rena, clasping the woman's wrist with her skinny, claw-like fingers, as she snarled:

"What have ye done with ther brat? Tell ther truth! Don't ye dare lie ter me! What have ye done with it, I say? Speak out before I strangle ye!"

The fiendish appearance of the old woman but increased Rena's terror, and she was still unable to speak.

"Why don't ye answer?" snarled Old Mag, giving the little woman a savage shake. "Have ye lost yer tongue? I want that kid, an' I'm goin' ter hev it! Ye needn't think ye kin take it 'way from me. Tell me where it is afore I strangle ye! Oh, I'd like ter put my fingers on that white throat—I'd like ter!"

Rena's lips moved, but only an inarticulate murmur came forth.

"Search the place," ordered Brandon, and he set the example.

Hank and Jim followed him, but the old woman still clung to Rena.

"Ye needn't think I'm goin' ter be cheated in this way, ye hussy!" hissed the old witch. "I'm not that kind of a woman. That little wretch is worth money ter me, even though blind. W'en ther kid sings, people come down liberal with their cash."

"Oh, I do not know what you are talking about!" gasped the little blue-eyed woman, helplessly. "Please let my wrist alone! You terrify me! Let me go!"

"Not much!" was the retort. "I hain't goin' ter let ye skip. We've got it straight that ther brat was taken here, an' you've got ter give it up afore you kin go."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Ho, ho! Mighty innocent, hain't ye?"

"I tell you the truth."

"Waal, I don't swaller it. I guess you kin lie as well as ther next one. I want that child, an' I'm goin' ter hev it, too."

"What child?"

"Oh, you don't know."

"Truly, I do not."

The old bag laughed in a hideous manner, but still clung fast to the little woman's wrist.

Rena drew as far from the creature as she possibly could, her whole soul filled with loathing which she could not conceal. The look of aversion in her blue eyes only aroused Old Mag the more.

"Oh, you don't like ther looks of me," snarled the woman who claimed to be Blind Ben's grandmother. "Waal, I was as purty as you once. You don't believe that, mebbe, but it's ther truth. So you kin see w'at you're comin' ter."

"God prevent!"

"Waal, he won't. You will be old and ugly and despised. It's only a matter of time.—But I didn't come here ter talk of that—I came fer ther child."

"I tell you t'uly there is no child here."

"Then, what hev ye done with it?" screamed the Gypsy woman. "I'll hev it afore I ever leave ye, so you may as well tell the truth fu'st as last."

"I know nothing about any child."

"Reckon that's so, ole woman," said Horror Hank, appearing. "Thar hain't no kid roun' this yere ranch."

"But she has hid it," asserted Brandon, who was at Hank's heels. "She is trying to keep it from us! She shall tell us where it is!"

"I have nothing to tell," declared Rena.

"Force it from her lips!"

"You cannot force what I do not know."

"Take her 'long with ther persession," squeaked Gentle Jim.

"That's what we'll do!" nodded Brandon.

"She must come with us."

"Never!"

Rena tore from the grasp of Old Mag and started for the open doorway, but Horror Hank intercepted her.

"Not ser fast, my purty," grinned the red-headed ruffian. "We want ye ter stay with us a bit."

Then Rena produced the revolver she had secured from the Mayor of Tar Heel, and she leveled it straight at Hank's head.

"Stand aside!" she cried, her blue eyes flashing. "If you attempt to lay a hand on me, I will blow your brains out!"

She had suddenly grown calm and determined, and now they recognized in her a dangerous and desperate woman.

"Holy poker!" gurgled the big tough.

"Heavens ter Hanuah!" piped Gentle Jim.

But Brandon was ready for the emergency.

Suddenly a muffling cloth was cast over Rena's head, and the revolver was wrested from her grasp. She struggled, but in vain; she tried to scream, but the cloth muffled her cries. She felt that she was being smothered, and, of a sudden, she fainted.

"All the better!" chuckled Ormal Brandon. "Now she will cause us less trouble. What is to be done with her, anyway, mother?"

"We'll take her along," said the old woman.

"But the town—it will be aroused by her disappearance."

"We kin fix that," assured Gentle Jim.

"How?"

"Arter ye git a good start, we'll set ther cabin afire, an' hev it fixed so it'll be roarin' afore ther nearest critter gits hyer. Tar Heel will think ther woman wuz roasted in ther fire."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Brandon. "If well executed, that will work beautifully. You fellows shall be paid well for your aid."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A DESPERATE ESCAPE.

"WAL, here ye be, my purty!" sneered Old Mag, as the cloth was removed from Rena's head. "You kicked er bit, but it wasn't no use kickin' 'gainst this crowd."

"Nary time," agreed Horror Hank, as he looked down at the face of the fair captive. "We're a tough gang ter tackle, you bet yer boots!"

"Wal, I sh'n'd snicker!" chimed Gentle Jim.

Brandon made no remark, but stood with folded arms, staring down at the woman.

Rena looked around her. The light of a fire that had been built a few minutes before showed her she was in a cave of some sort, for the rocky walls seemed on every side but one, and there lay a curtain of black darkness.

She had been dragged to that place by those creatures who came upon her in the cabin at Tar Heel.

How far from the camp they were she could not tell, as she was only conscious a part of the time during the journey.

"Now, don't ye wish you hed told whar ther kid was?" demanded the old bag. "Then we'd let ye bin whar ye was. Now, ye've got ter tell, anyhow, ef ye ever 'spect ter leave here, an' ther sooner ye speak up ther better it'll be fer ye."

Rena did not reply. She had nothing to tell, and she felt it were useless to appeal to her captors.

The old Gypsy woman gave a snarl.

"So ye won't talk, eh? Wal, we'll see! I reckon bread an' water'll bring ye roun'."

"Keep your eyes on her, mother," said Brandon. "I wish to discuss other plans with these gentlemen."

"Oh, I'll watch her, my son; don't ye worry 'bout that."

Old Mag crouched by the fire, and the men sat down on some stones near at hand. Rena could hear all they had to say.

"It is best you two should return to town at once," declared Brandon. "They must not suspect you there, and if you are missing, suspicion may fall on you."

"That's so," nodded Hank. "But w'en hed we better come roun' next time?"

"Some time in the morning. I will have my plans all arranged by that time. As for me, I must go out and move our wagon now, so the people of Tar Heel will think we have departed from this section."

"It won't be healthy fer you ter show up in town," observed Gentle Jim.

"I think you are right," acknowledged Brandon. "They might take a notion to harm me there."

"Ef they did, it'l be with er rope, an' that's mig' ty uncomfortable."

"I have never tried it, but I have no doubt you speak the truth."

"An' 'bout this kid?"

"The boy must be found. He is worth money to us, and it will be to your benefit to find him. We shall try to squeeze the truth from this woman here, and, if she knows anything about him, may succeed. But we cannot depend on her entirely. It may be she does not know anything about the kid at all."

"An' then—"

"The sport and that wild girl must be watched. Keep your eyes open for that fellow known as Bumm, for he is the chief cause

of all the trouble. However, I fancy he will lay low."

"This yere's all, is it?"

"It is all I think of now. Come, no time is to be lost. Tar Heel is probably thoroughly aroused by the burning of the cabin and the disappearance of the woman, so you had best be on hand at roll-call. I will go a short distance with you, for I must move the horse and wagon, as I said."

Then, once more cautioning Old Mag to keep her eyes on the woman, Brandon led the way from the cave, the other ruffians following at his heels.

Rena was left alone with the bag. The position was not an enviable one, to say the least.

Lighting her black pipe, the Gypsy bag crouched by the fire, now and then casting baleful glances toward the fair captive.

For a long time Rena remained silent, but she finally acquired sufficient courage to speak, and she asked:

"Who is this child you are making so much trouble about?"

"As if ye did not know!" snapped the old woman, and with that, she calmly continued smoking.

After another brief silence, Rena asserted:

"I do not know. I tell you, you have made a great mistake if you think I know anything about this matter."

"That soun's well, but it won't do ye a bit of good ter lie, my fine lady. We got it straight—ther kid was taken ter your cabin. Whatever ye did with him I don't know, but ye'll have ter give him up afore ye git clear of this place. W'at d'yer think of that?"

"I think it is an outrage!"

"That soun's well; but, outrage or not, we know w'at we're erbout. You can't pull ther wool over our eyes. I will have that brat, an' w'en I git it—ur-rr!"

"What then?"

"I'll beat it within an inch of its life!" snarled the ugly old bag.

"Then, if I knew where it was, I would never tell."

That enraged the old woman.

"Oh, ye wouldn't, eh?" she almost screamed. "Then I'd give you ther beatin' in ther brat's place!"

Rena's eyes flashed.

"It would not be well for you that you land your hands on me!" she asserted.

Mag was amazed.

"Oh, it wouldn't! Wal, why not?"

"I think I should defend myself."

"Hel hei hel" laughed the Gypsy. "You think I hain't got no strength 'cause I'm an old woman, but you'd git mighty taken back. My muscle hain't ter be grinned at."

"Is the child yours?"

"Is it? Wal, whose d'yer think it is? Of course it's mine—my own gran'child."

"All the more shame for you to beat it!"

"Bab! Don't try ter lecter me! I won't stan' that kind of soft talk!"

"You may have to."

The old woman sprung up and came toward Rena, her fingers working and her eyes snapping, while she almost frothed at the mouth.

"Have a care!" she screamed. "I may take a notion to try my finger-nails on your face!"

Her aspect was really appalling, and it was no wonder the girl shrank away. Mag saw this evidence of alarm, and she laughed with devilish glee.

"I thought you wouldn't be so terrible bold w'en yer come ter face me!" she chuckled. "I'm a reg'ler tiger w'en I git stirred up!"

Rena made no reply, and after bending over the woman captive and threatening her for several minutes, the old bag retreated to the fire, where she crouched once more.

Then the unfortunate woman began planning to escape. Being all alone with the old woman as a guard, it seemed as if she might outwit her and get away. Of course she had no thought of sleep, but the pipe seemed to make the old bag drowsy, for she began to nod by the fire.

However, when Rena stirred, the old woman was wide awake in an instant.

"I must pretend to sleep," thought the captive.

She arranged herself as comfortably as possible by the fire, and lay there watching the flames. After a time she allowed her eyes to slowly close, and so, in time, she seemed to fall asleep in the most natural manner imaginable.

But Old Mag was not to be easily deceived. All through the long hours she remained crouching by the fire, the old pipe held in her yellow teeth. Scarcely would Rena open her eyes the least bit when the Gypsy woman's would pop wide open, and she would stare at the captive.

As the time passed, Rena grew desperate. She knew morning could not be far away, and Brandon was liable to return. Then it would be impossible for her to escape. If the worst came, she must venture an encounter with the old woman, pitting her strength against Mag's.

At length the bag seemed to really fall asleep. Rena determined to make the attempt without delay, and she arose as noiselessly as possible. She was fairly on her feet before Old Mag stirred.

Then the Gypsy woman opened her eyes and looked for the captive.

A cry broke from Old Mag's lips, and she started to arise.

Without a moment's hesitation, Rena sprung upon the old woman, knocking her prostrate on the rocky floor.

Then the desperate girl fled into the darkness.

She knew not where she was going, and she could not tell what pitfalls might lay in her path. Still she fled on, her hands outstretched. Behind her she heard the old woman screaming like a lunatic, and she knew Mag was in pursuit. Once she ran against something that flung her to the floor. Although dazed, she struggled to her feet and fled onward.

And then she suddenly found herself in the open air.

The faintest flush of approaching dawn was in the east, and birds were singing their morning carols. From out of the cave behind her still issued the furious screams of the pursuing hag.

"Which way shall I turn? Heavenly Father guide me!"

With that appeal on her lips, Rena turned and plunged into some bushes near at hand, hastening onward as swiftly as she could without making much noise.

And thus she actually escaped from the Gypsy woman who had been her guard, for when Mag emerged from the cave, nothing was to be seen of the late captive.

Rena hurried onward, scarcely taking any heed at all concerning her surroundings. Morning came and the sun rose bright and beautiful. Then she paused to rest.

"Now, if I only knew the way to Tar Heel, I would be all right," she murmured. "I have escaped from that horrible old woman, but I feel sure I was aided by the hand of Providence. How could I have succeeded otherwise?"

Having rested, she arose and moved onward once more. She was really happy at her good fortune, as she considered it, and she had no doubt but she would eventually reach the mining-town in safety.

The sun rose higher and higher.

She was passing along a small defile when a sudden shout from above caused her heart to stand still. She looked upward and saw Brandon and Horror Hank gazing down upon her.

"Great Heaven!" she gasped. "I am discovered by those wretches!"

Then she fled for her life, and she knew they were in pursuit.

From the defile she came out upon a path that led downward. She followed it at a run, hearing the cries of her pursuers close behind.

Suddenly she saw a cabin, the door of which was standing wide open.

"I will find shelter there!" was her delighted thought.

Toward the cabin she dashed—in at the door she hurried. She looked around for the owner of the cabin, and then a child rose up before her.

It was Blind Ben.

"Who is there?" he asked.

A shriek broke from her lips—she staggered forward, clasped him in her arms, and then fell senseless to the floor!

CHAPTER XL.

GIVEN HER CHOICE.

A STRANGE sight greeted the eyes of Brandon and Horror Hank when they reached the cabin door.

The unconscious woman was stretched on the floor, while the blind boy was kneeling beside her, doing his best to arouse her.

"Wake up, lady!" little Ben was saying, as his hands caressed her face. "You need not be afraid of me! I will not hurt you! Please wake up!"

"It's the kid!" shouted Brandon, in delight.

At sound of that voice, a cry of fear broke from the blind boy's lips, and he arose to his feet, trembling with terror.

"It am, shore ernough!" agreed Horror Hank. "Ther shemale has led us straight ter him. We're in luck!"

"I should say so!"

As Brandon strode into the cabin, Blind Ben fell on his knees beside the unconscious woman, shrilly crying:

"You sha'n't touch me! You sha'n't touch her! Go 'way! You are a bad man, and not my father at all!"

The Gypsy's dark hand fell on the boy's shoulder.

"So that is what they have been telling you, is it?" he growled. "Well, Old Mag will soon pound those notions out of your head."

At the mention of his dreaded mistress, the blind boy broke down and cried with terror.

"Shut up that!" commanded Brandon. "Come, Hank, pick up the woman and tote her. I will carry the boy."

The red-headed ruffian was not slow to obey, and they soon left the cabin.

When Rena opened her eyes again, she was back in the cave.

Brandon and Horror Hank were near the fire, but Old Mag was not to be seen.

However, the first sounds which greeted the ears of the recovered woman, were blows and screams of pain that came from another part of the cave. She listened, her soul filled with horror.

"Oh, Granny, Granny, Granny!" pleaded a childish voice that was full of terror and agony. "Please don't beat me any more—please don't! I can't stand it! You are killing me! I will always be good—I will do anything! Oh, don't, don't!" as the blows continued to fall. "I did not mean to do anything wrong! Oh! oh! oh! Granny—good Granny! You will kill me!"

"Yes, you brat, I'll kill ye!" snarled a furious voice. "I'll teach you ter run away frum me, you little whelp! Take that, an' that, an' that!"

"Oh! oh! oh!" shrieked the childish voice again. "I did not run away! He carried me! Oh, Granny—don't! don't!"

Horror Hank moved uneasily, then he said:

"The ole gal's killin' ther boy! I'm goin' ter stop it! I can't stan' it, cuss me ef I kin?"

But Brandon arose before him.

"You let Mag alone!" warned the Gypsy, an ominous light in his eyes. "She knows how to use ther brat, an' she won't hev you stick your nose in."

Hank sat down again, but there was actually a look of pain on his face. Ruffian and desperado though he was, every blow that sounded through the cave made him wince.

"Ha! ha! ha!" screamed Old Mag, with fiendish laughter. "This is w'at ye need, you little wretch! How I love ter lick ye!"

The appeals of the boy were fearful to hear as he pleaded to the woman with a demon's soul, He sobbed and shrieked and groaned, but still the cruel blows fell.

As soon as she could command her strength, Rena arose to her feet.

"Stand aside!" she cried. "That wretched woman is killing the child!"

"What you mean to do?" asked Brandon, placing himself before her.

"Save the boy from her!"

"Well, you will not interfere," and, despite her struggles, he seized and held her fast.

The shrieks became fainter and fainter till they sunk to a low moaning sound that fairly tore the heart of the woman who was compelled to listen. Still the blows fell and still that devilish woman laughed!

Finally the moaning ceased, and all was still but the sounds of the blows.

"Finally, those ceased.

A few moments later, Old Mag appeared in the firelight, her face looking like that of a fiend incarnate.

"I think I have fixed ther little fool!" she grated.

"Why, mother!" exclaimed Brandon; "there's blood on your hands! You have killed the child!"

"I don't know but I have!" was her reply.

Then Rena fainted in the Gypsy's arms, and was lowered to the floor.

When the woman became conscious again, her eyes rested on a corpulent figure seated on the ground near by, with its back against the cavern wall.

It was Mr. Malcome.

His feet seemed bound together, and his hands were behind his back. He was apparently a captive.

"I am so glad you have recovered, Rena!" he exclaimed, as he saw her looking toward him.

"You here?" she gasped.

"Well, I should say so!" he answered; "and I am here decidedly against my wishes."

"What do you mean?"

"I am a captive, like yourself."

"Aubrey Kent, you lie!"

The corpulent man started.

"What do you mean, Rena?" he demanded.

"Just what I said," was her bold retort, as her strength swiftly came back to her.

"But I do not understand!"

"Bah! Why will you try to play this game with me? I know you for what you are—a black-hearted villain!"

"Are you deranged, Rena?"

"I was never more in my right mind. It is useless for you to try to deceive me further, for I can look behind any mask you wear. You are a most despicable scoundrel, and at your door I lay all my trouble from first to last. The blood of my husband and brother is on your hands as much as if you had struck them down personally! From first to last, you have been my evil shadow, and, though you did deceive me in the past, you can do so no longer. You are not a captive here, and it is useless for you to claim so. In truth, you are the chief of these dastardly villains, and you may as well show yourself in your true colors!"

He uttered a grating snarl.

"Have it so if you will!" and he flung off the cords that seemed to bind him, rising to his feet and standing before her. "You are in my power, and you shall do as I say."

"That is where you make a mistake. You shall not force me to anything I do not wish to do."

"Foolish woman! You do not know your

own weakness. How completely are you in my hands! I have tried to win you by all other means than force, but, having failed, I now resort to force."

"Like the cowardly wretch you are!"

"Harsh words break no bones. You have a wonderful spirit, Rena, but it shall be conquered. I have been your friend in the past; you should have a care not to make me your enemy."

"My friend! Lying wretch! You have never been anything but my enemy! I thought you my friend, but I was deceived. Now, I know the truth, although no living being has told me. I think it has been revealed to me by an All-wise Power above."

"Bah! There is no God!"

"Mocker! The time will come when you will feel His hand! Beware of His judgment!"

"I fear it not."

"But it will come upon you. The blood of my husband and brother cry out for retribution!"

"There, there! drop this, Rena! Why will you remain so foolish! There is but one resort for you now."

"And that?"

"You must marry me."

She had risen, and now she stood confronting him, the fire-light revealing her blazing blue eyes.

"Marry you!" was her scornful retort. "I would sooner wed a cannibal, for such a being only destroys the body; you would destroy both soul and body!"

"Well, you can have your choice."

"How?"

"Between myself and Brandon the Gypsy. He has a claim upon you, for he made you a captive, and he says he loves you well enough to make you his—mistress!"

She started back.

"No, no!"

"That is exactly what I mean," the portly scoundrel went on. "I will marry you—make you my wife. But if you fall into Brandon's hands, he will not consider it necessary to have a ceremony performed."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE END APPROACHES.

THERE was a stir at the hotel when it was known that the blind boy had disappeared and had probably been carried away by the Gypsies.

"They will not get off with him," assured Basil. "We will look after that gang, for I am more than half-inclined to believe the old woman and the young man are not the only ones in this vicinity."

"But your sister—we should look after her first," said the mayor.

Basil agreed to this, but said he hoped to kill two birds with one stone, and look for the blind boy at the same time he was searching for Rena.

No time was to be wasted, but just as they were leaving the hotel, Jerry Jiggers came hurrying up.

"Hell on here!" cried the Man of Schemes. "I have a little business with you, Mr. Mayor."

"With me?" questioned the magistrate of Tar Heel, in surprise.

"Yes, with you."

"What is the nature of your business?"

"I arrest you for forgery, Wallace Wickey!"

The mayor started back in amazement, while exclamations of surprise came from the lips of the others.

"I am a detective," added Mr. Jiggers, triumphantly, "and I have been on your track for some time. As Owen Sedgewick, you deceived me somewhat, but I am now sure of you."

The hand of the Sparkler Sharp fell on the detective's collar, and, with a surge, the Man of Schemes was flung aside.

"You are a little late, my friend," said the sport. "This man is already my prisoner. I happen to be in the detective business myself."

With some difficulty, Mr. Jiggers recovered his balance, crying:

"You have arrested him?"

"That is about the size of it," was the reply; and still Basil, or Mark Eudane, as we shall hereafter call him, did not positively claim Wickey was under arrest.

"But this is an outrage!" stormed the baffled detective. "This man is my game!"

"I beg to differ," bowed the sport; "he is my game. You were slow about the trick, and you are badly left. The best and most sensible thing you can do is, give it up gracefully and take a sneak. If you interfere with my prisoner now, I shall make it very uncomfortable for you."

"Confound you!" snapped Jiggers. "I thought you were after him, but I did not mean to let you beat me."

"And so you tried to pull the wool over my eyes with your glib tongue. Well, you now see all your schemes go for naught. I should advise you to go on with your soda-water and ice-cream tunnel, your big mountain reservoir, or your perpetual toboggan slide. You may find a sucker who will go in with you on them."

"Well, it is your turn to laugh," confessed

the discomfited officer; "but there is another time coming. I may be able to run across your path, and pull a prisoner out from under your nose some day."

"Do not count on that, for you never will."

"Why?"

"This is my last job."

"You are going out of the business?"

"Now you have struck it."

"Then let me have this fellow. I will make it right with you."

"I am not doing business that way, sir; and I advise you to make yourself scarce about here. You are out of it altogether, and the sooner you get out of Tar Heel, the better you will feel."

Grumblingly, Mr. Jiggers beat a retreat. When he was gone, Wallace Wicby turned to Mark Eudane, his hand outstretched.

"I owe you my thanks, Mark," he said. "You have helped me out of a tight corner. But what am I going to do? I must have the freedom of the town, and, if this hound of the law sees me thus, he may smell a rat and attempt the arrest again. I do not want to hurt him."

"You are released on parole for a time," smiled the sport. "If he tries to rake you in, you are still my captive."

"All right. That will settle it."

Mr. Jiggers did not try to arrest Wicby. Instead of that, he took the Sparkler Sharp's advice and made himself "scarce" around Tar Heel.

The mayor at once went out and stirred up the place. He was not long in making all the citizens understand he desired their immediate attention, as there was going to be a man-hunt of some kind. Within an hour a big crowd was gathered in front of the hotel.

The mayor came out on the steps and addressed them, telling them he believed the woman who occupied the cabin that was burned the night before, had been carried away by enemies, and he proposed to hunt down the gang.

Gentle Jim was in the crowd, and his ears drank in every word. He had been left in the town to learn of any move that should be made, and he was to notify his comrades in crime of all that occurred.

But it happened that the Sparkler Sharp suspected the little fire-eater, and he put two men to watch the rascal. They kept close track of Jim, and when that worthy had learned the plans of the citizens, he tried to slip away.

But he did not succeed. The two men who had been watching him, promptly pounced upon him and made him their prisoner, although he fought like a human tiger. Both of the men had a grudge against Jim, and he was badly used up when they were done with him.

Three days later he died of the wounds received in the struggle.

The searchers were organized and about to leave the town, when an old prospector came in. He inquired what was up, and, on being told, declared he could lead them to the very place where their game was.

"What is that?" cried Mark, as he pushed his way to the old man's side. "What do you know about this matter?"

"A right good bit," was the reply.

"If you can aid us, you shall be well paid."

"Wal, I kin aid ye, an' don't ye fergit it!"

"How do you happen to know anything about it?"

"Wal, ye see I didn't git inter Tar Heel las' night, as I ned planned, an' so I riz up early like this mornin' an' wuz makin' fer town. Jest as I wuz passin' long a ridge 'way out hyer by Dixon's Raveen, I heerd voices."

"Yes, yes; go on!"

"I tuck a peak over inter ther raveen, an' I saw two men, one of which I recko'nized as the imp of Satan, Horror Hank."

"That whelp!"

"Yep. Wal, them two critters wuz each totin' suthin' over his shoulder. Hank hed er feemale, but she seemed ter be dead ur senseless."

"Rena, by Jove!"

"Ther other galoot, as I didn't know, hed a boy thot he wuz sackin'."

"Thet wuz Benny!" cried Wild Bess, in delight.

The old prospector continued:

"I tuck a noshun ter folter them, fer I smelt suthin' crooked. I done so, and I traced them ter their hoel."

"Where?"

"Over yen, 'bout five mile."

"Can you lead us to it?"

"Wal, I shu'd say so!"

Mark turned to the crowd of citizens.

"Men of Tar Heel," he cried, "do you know this man?" and he laid a hand on the prospector's arm.

"We do," was the almost unanimous reply.

"Is he square?"

"As a brick."

"That settles it. My friend, you are commissioned guide of this party. The quicker you lead us to the place where that woman and boy were taken the greater will be our satisfaction and the larger your reward."

"All right. Jest folter Old Rambler."

They did follow him, and he led them directly

to the mouth of the cave where the unsuspecting kidnappers were concealed. The party halted at a certain distance from the cave.

"Make ready for hot work," commanded the mayor.

"We can easily handle two men," was the laughing retort of one citizen.

"But we may find twenty instead of two. We do not know how large a party of outlaws is concealed in yonder cave. It is certain Horror Hank will not surrender without a battle, and you know him."

"We will introduce him to a hemp neck-tie," softly laughed one of the party.

"Are you ready?" asked the mayor.

They said they were, and he gave to word to advance. Wicby, Mark Eudane, Wild Bess and G. W. Bumm were at the very front of the rush.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE END IS REACHED.

INTO the cave poured the crowd from Tar Heel. The light of the fire burning inside showed them which way to go, and they soon had the Gypsies and their allies cornered.

But there was a struggle, and Aubry Kent made the fiercest fight of all. He singled out the Sparkler Sharp and made a rush for him, a knife gleaming in his hand.

"By the Heaven above!" he screamed, "you shall not live to triumph over me, Mark Eudane!"

"Is that you, Aubry Kent?" shouted the sport. "Then we are well met! You deserve death at my hand!"

The Sharp did not carry a knife of his own, but he snatched one from the belt of the nearest man and then met the rush of the portly villain.

With a clash their knives came together, then ensued a duel that was simply wonderful in its fury. The ring of their weapons sounded through the rocky chamber, and, like demons, they strove each to end the life of the other. Their faces were convulsed with fury, and their eyes blazed like coals of living fire.

Clash! clash! clash! How the knives struck together! Sparks of fire flashed from the blades!

Horror Hank and the Gypsies were soon conquered. Old Mag fought like a demon, but she was readily overpowered. Then some of the men started to aid the Spotter Sport.

"Stand back!" shouted Mark. "This man's life belongs to me. Let no one interfere!"

"Stop!" cried Rena, her voice ringing through the cave. "His life belongs to God!"

And then a wonderful thing occurred. A black object shot down from the roof of the cavern, striking the corpulent villain fairly on the head and crushing him to the rocky floor—dead!

It was a falling stone that had been dislodged from the roof above, but it seemed as if the hand of an avenging God had cast it upon the cornered but still bloodthirsty wretch.

Mark Eudane bent over the fallen man and looked into his face.

"He is dead!" were the words that came in a whisper from his lips.

A feeling of awe fell on every one who witnessed the strange ending of a sinful life. Perhaps there was not one present who did not see in the falling stone the work of a Power that was not earthly.

For several moments a dead silence rested on all, then Rena advanced toward Mark, her hands outstretched:

"Brother!"

"My little sister!"

Then she was clasped in his arms.

"Thank God for this moment!" she sobbed. "My dear big noble brother, we are reunited at last!"

Something like a groan came from his lips. Neither saw the man who stood staring at Rena as if she was one risen from the dead.

"Can you say that?" cried Mark, chokingly. "Remember, Rena, I have his blood on my hands."

"You have not!"

He thrust her away and stared into her face as if he believed her demented;

"What do you mean?" he hoarsely asked.

"That wretch who has just met a merciful fate told me everything while he held me a captive. That is why I know you now and have the strength to meet you. He thought he had me in his power so there was no escape, and he revealed all his vile work. He has been our evil genius.

"I know it, curse!"

"He is dead! Curse him not! Never again can he bring misery and despair into the world. He confessed that I was legally the wife of Lewis Lenoir, and that he deceived you into believing the marriage a sham. Then you would not bear Lewis's explanation. Your blood was boiling, and you forced him to fight you."

"And I killed him!"

"No! He may still be living!"

"What do you mean? You must be mad! He is surely dead!"

"Aubry Kent led him to believe he had killed you when you fell before his bullet. He was not touched!"

"Not touched?"

"No; but he thought your blood was on his hands, and he fled. Then Kent gave it out that both were dead, and he had you spirited away."

"My God! I am just beginning to understand the depths of that man's vileness!"

A groan startled them. They turned and saw G. W. Bumm swaying, as if about to fall. He blindly put out his hands, whispering:

"Rena, my wife! Alive!"

In a moment both Mark and Rena were at his side, and peering into his face.

"What is this?" cried Mark. "Who are you?"

"I am Lewis Lenoir!" was the answer. "It is not strange you do not know me, for drink has wrought a sad change. And I—I believed my wife dead. I thought I saw her lying in the Morgue!

The little woman gazed into his face—wildly, joyously.

"Lewis!" she shrieked. "Yes, it is he!"

Then husband and wife were clasped in each other's arms.

For some moments their joy knew no bounds, and the eyes of the rough spectators were filled with tears. Suddenly the little woman started back.

"Our child?" she cried—"we are forgetting our child!"

"Our child?" echoed Lenoir.

"Yes, one you never saw—one Aubry Kent made me believe was dead—little Eva. That wretch gave her to those Gypsies and they dressed her as a boy! She is known as Blind Ben!"

"Heaven above! is it possible!" cried the man.

"The blind child my own daughter! Where is she?"

"Out yonder in the darkness of the cave. This fiendish old woman beat her insensible, but I have heard her moaning since. Come, we will find her."

A burning brand was taken from the fire and they went in search of the child. They found her stretched on the cold ground, murmuring to herself, and her father lifted her in his arms.

"Who is it?" faintly asked the child. "Is it the Heavenly Father he told me about? Have you come to take me to that beautiful Land of Light where I shall see once more and never be blind again?"

"I am your own true father, little one," answered Lewis Lenoir, brokenly. "I have found you, and I will take you from this place.

"We must carry her to the open air," he said to Rena.

The poor wife heard and understood, but she could not speak. Lewis bore the child from the cave, while Mark supported Rena to the outer air. Wild Bess and the others followed, leaving the three captives bound by the fire.

Outside the cave the child was placed on a soft bank of moss, while its father and mother bent over it. Its face was very white, and there was a streak of blood across one cheek.

"Oh, I can hear a bird!" came from the pale lips. "How sweet is its song! It is singing to me. And the sun is warm on my face. Are you near—father?"

"Yes—yes," was the choking reply. "I am close by, and here is your mother—your own true mother."

Rena bent her face close to that of the dying child, for little Eva's minutes were numbered.

"Yes, I am your mother," she sobbed. "I have found you, my darling!"

The blind girl lifted her arms and placed them about Rena's neck.

"Are you my really and truly mother?"

"Yes, I am your own true mother."

"Your voice is soft and kind," said the weak little voice, "and I love you."

Oh, how those words wrung that mother's heart! With tears running down her face, she kissed the child from whom she had been parted by the devilish wiles of a heartless wretch.

"You are not like Granny," the little one went on. "Granny beats me awful! It hurts so bad it seems as if I can't stand it sometimes."

Wild Bess was weeping, and some of the strong men sobbed aloud.

"She shall never touch you again," said Rena.

For some minutes the dying child lay murmuring of birds and flowers and brooks. She did not seem to suffer any pain then, and there was a look of happiness on her face—a look that was pitiful to see.

"Where is father?" she asked, at length.

"I am here," replied Lewis Lenoir.

"I want you to kiss me too, for you know I think you are the best man in all the world."

He kissed her, while his tears fell on her face.

"Why are you crying?" asked the little one.

"You must not cry, for I am so happy. It was you who told me about the Heavenly Father and that beautiful Land of Light. You said he would come and show me the way, and I think He is coming now. If I should go there first, you will come and find me by-and-by, won't you? I know you said you had lost the way, but I am sure He will find you if you want to come. Will you try and find me there?"

"I will," was the answer—"God permitting, I will find you there!"

"And you, mother?"

The Sparkler Sharp.

"Yes, my child, yes; we will both come to you by-and-by."

"That makes me—happy," and the voice sunk to a whisper. "Way up there I shall be able to see you both. Oh, your faces must be beautiful, for you are so good! Yes—I shall be able—to see. Why, I can see now!"

She started up with sudden strength. They looked into her face, but the blue eyes were still sightless. What she saw was not of an earthly nature.

"Yes, I can see!" she cried, holding up the thin white hands. "How light it is! Oh, I can hear—beautiful music! It is so sweet! And there is—the Heavenly Father! He is—coming this-way! He is coming—to take me—by the hand—and lead me to the—Land of Light. He smiles on me. He motions—for me—to come. I must—go. Don't forget—to—find—me—there."

She sank back in her mother's arms. They looked on her sweetly smiling face and saw she had passed to the "Land of Light."

It was a vengeful crowd that rushed back into the cave, but one of the captives had escaped earthly punishment.

In some way, Old Mag had freed herself, and with a knife she had opened an artery. When they bent over her they found she was dead.

Ormal Brandon and Horror Hank met death by lynching, for that enraged mob was not to be checked in their purpose.

As he was about to die, Hank confessed that he was Tiger Scott, who killed the woman in Denver. His true name was Orson Scott, and it was his knife that had fallen into the Sparkler Sharp's hands, and not the knife of "Owen Sedgewick."

He also explained that Aubry Kent was the sport's Unknown Foe, and disguised as "Uncle Jaggs," the drunken tramp, the villain had deceived them all.

It is not necessary to make the story longer. The clouds were cleared away, and those long separated were united at last. Little Eva's death was the only cloud that marred their happiness.

As for Wild Bess, a happiness came to her that she did not expect, for Mark Eudane made her his wife. She was ready to do anything to learn, and it was not long before Mark had a wife of education and refinement—one to be proud of, indeed.

And Bess fairly worshiped her handsome, noble husband. To her he was a king.

Doris Dalton contented herself with a German count. His fortunes were in a crippled condition, and the widow's wealth bought her both position and a title. She did not come at all near dying of a broken heart.

As for Wallace Wicby, a cloud still overshadowed him. He plunged into the wilder regions of the great West, and, under a new name, he is an honored and trusted citizen in a certain bustling town.

THE END.

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